魔法科高校の劣等生⑬
スティープルチェース編

西暦二〇九六年、七月。今年も、魔法科高校生にとって夏最大のイベントである全国魔法科高校親善魔法競技大会、通称『九校戦』が開催される。しかし今年の『九校戦』はひと味違っていた。

競技種目及びルール改定。

本番まで残すところ一ヶ月の段階でもたらされた何の前触れもない大幅変更に、魔法科高校各校は慌ただしい対応を迫られる。

そんなある日、九校戦の作戦立案に当たっていた達也の元へ、匿名のメッセージが届けられる。

それは、九校戦を舞台とした新たな陰謀の存在を示唆するもので――。

華やかな競技の裏で繰り広げられる暗闘。昼なお暗い富士の人工樹海を駆け抜ける達也が、背信の陰謀に挑む！
『二学年度の部』九校戦編登場！

さ-14-13

魔法科高校の劣等生⑬
スティープルチェース編

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佐島 勤（さとう つとむ）

西暦19XX年、日本の片田舎に生まれる。和洋のスペースオペラを糧に少年時代を過ごす。青年時代、ファンタジーと伝奇小説に転向。卒業後、企業戦士（ただし雑兵）として現実世界に魂を売り渡すも、西暦2011年、遅れてきたジュブナイル作家として空想世界に帰還を果たす。（本プロフィールには虚偽と誇張表現が含まれています）

【電撃文庫作品】

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魔法科高校の劣等生⑬ スティープルチェース編

イラスト：石田可奈（いしだ かな）

西暦19XX年生まれ。挿絵は初仕事。本業はアニメーター。アニメ『俺の妹。』の総作画監督を担当。『魔法科高校』でもいよいよ本領発揮！

SpecialThanks：ジミーストーンさん。金子恵美さん。

魔法科高校の劣等生 13

The irregular at magic high school

スティープルチェース編

佐島勤

Tsutomu Sato

illustration／石田可奈

Kana Ishida

illustrator assistant／シノー・ストーン、末永康子

design／BEE-PEE

「幸いまだ時間はあるから……」
「こんなに競技種目が変更になるなんて！」
中条あずさ
なかじょう・あずさ
真由美にかわって生徒会会長となった。オドオドした性格で引っ込み思案。
五十里 啓
いそり・けい
二年生。前・生徒会会計。魔法理論の成績は学年トップ。千代田花音とは許嫁同士。
九重八雲
ここのえ・やくも
古式魔法「忍術」の使い手。達也の体術の師匠。
「深雪、頼む」
「かしこまりました」
「悪いね」
司波達也
しば・たつや
司波兄妹の兄。国立魔法大学付属第一高校2年E組所属。新設された魔工科に進学した。全てに達観している。妹・深雪の『ガーディアン』。
司波深雪
しば・みゆき
2年A組。達也の妹。昨年主席入学した優等生。冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する。『重度のブラコン』。

一条将輝
いちじょう・まさき

第三高校の二年生。九校戦に二年連続で出場。十師族・一条家の次期当主。

「決まってしまったことに俺たちがあれこれ言っても、どうにもならない」

「パラサイドールの性能テストは、『九校戦』で行う」

「道士の先生方を食客としてお迎えいただけませんか」

吉祥寺真紅郎
きちじょうじ・しんくろう

第三高校の二年生。九校戦に二年連続で出場。「カーディナル・ジョージ」の異名で知られている。

「そうだね……」

九島 烈
くどう・れつ

世界最強の魔法師の一人と目されていた人物。敬意を以て「老師」と呼ばれる。

周 公瑾
しゅう・こうきん

大亜連合の呂と陳を横浜に手引きした美貌の青年。中華街に巣くう、謎の人物。

千代田花音
ちよだ・かのん
三年生。摩利にかわり、風紀委員長となる。五十里啓とは許嫁同士。
「皆は無理しないで良いよ！」
黒羽文弥
くろば・ふみや
四葉家の次期当主候補。達也と深雪の再従弟（はとこ）にあたる少年。亜夜子という双子の姉を持つ。
「幻衝（ファント・ブロウ）！」
黒羽亜夜子
くろば・あやこ
達也と深雪の再従妹（はとこ）にあたる少女。文弥という双子の弟を持つ。
「私の圧勝、ですわ」
七宝琢磨
しっぽう・たくま
今年の『新入生』総代を務める生徒。一科生。有力魔法師の家系「師補十八家」のひとつ『七宝』の長男。
「くうっ……!!」

プライム・フォー
Prime Four

九校戦の新競技スティープルチェース・クロスカントリーの最中に乱入してきた、謎の戦闘用ガイノイド。コードネームは『最初の四個体(プライム・フォー)』。

魔法技能師開発研究所

西暦2030年代、第三次世界大戦前に緊迫化する国際情勢に対応して日本政府が次々に設立した魔法師開発の為の研究所。その目的は魔法の開発ではなくあくまでも魔法師の開発であり、目的とする魔法に最適な魔法師を産み出す為の遺伝子操作を含めて研究されていた。

魔法技能師開発研究所は第一から第十までの10ヶ所設立され、現在も5ヶ所が稼働中である。

各研究所の詳細は以下のとおり。

魔法技能師開発第一研究所

2031年、金沢市に設立。現在は閉鎖。

テーマは対人戦闘を想定した生体に直接干渉する魔法の開発。気化魔法「爆裂」はその派生形態。ただし人体の動きを操作する魔法はパペット・テロ（操り人形化した人間によるカミカゼテロ）を誘発するものとして禁止されていた。

魔法技能師開発第二研究所

2031年、淡路島に設立。稼働中。

第一研のテーマと対をなす魔法として、無機物に干渉する魔法、特に酸化還元反応に関わる吸収系魔法を開発。

魔法技能師開発第三研究所

2032年、厚木市に設立。稼働中。

単独で様々な状況に対応できる魔法師の開発を目的としてマルチキャストの研究を推進。特に、同時発動、連続発動が可能な魔法数の限界を実験し、多数の魔法を同時発動可能な魔法師を開発。

魔法技能師開発第四研究所

詳細は不明。場所は旧東京都と旧山梨県の県境付近と推定。設立は2033年と推定。現在は閉鎖されたことになっているが、これも実態は不明。旧第四研のみ政府とは別に、国に対し強い影響力を持つスポンサーにより設立され、現在は国から独立しそのスポンサーの支援下で運営されているとの噂がある。またそのスポンサーにより2020年代以前から事実上運営が始まっていたとも噂されている。

精神干渉魔法を利用して、魔法師の無意識領域に存在する魔法という名の異能の源泉、魔法演算領域そのものの強化を目指していたとされている。

魔法技能師開発第五研究所

2035年、四国の宇和島市に設立。稼働中。

物質の形状に干渉する魔法を研究。技術的難度が低い流体制御が主流となるが、固体の形状干渉にも成功している。その成果がUSNAと共同開発した「バハムート」。流体干渉魔法「アビス」と合わせ、二つの戦略級魔法を開発した魔法研究機関として国際的に名を馳せている。

魔法技能師開発第六研究所

2035年、仙台市に設立。稼働中。

魔法による熱量制御を研究。第八研と並び基礎研究機関的な色彩が強く、その反面軍事的な色彩は薄い。ただ第四研を除く魔法技能師開発研究所の中で、最も多く遺伝子操作実験が行われたと言われている（第四研については実態が不明）。

魔法技能師開発第七研究所

2036年、東京に設立。現在は閉鎖。

対集団戦闘を念頭に置いた魔法を開発。その成果が群体制御魔法。第六研が非軍事的色彩の強いものだった反動で、有事の首都防衛を兼ねた魔法師開発の研究施設として設立された。

魔法技能師開発第八研究所

2037年、北九州市に設立。稼働中。

魔法による重力、電磁力、強い相互作用、弱い相互作用の操作を研究。第六研以上に基礎研究機関的な色彩が強い。ただし、国防軍との結び付きは第六研と異なり強固。これは第八研の研究内容が核兵器の開発と容易に結びつくからであり、国防軍のお墨付きを得て核兵器開発疑惑を免れているという側面がある。

魔法技能師開発第九研究所

2037年、奈良市に設立。現在は閉鎖。

現代魔法と古式魔法の融合、古式魔法のノウハウを現代魔法に取り込むことで、ファジーな術式操作など現代魔法が苦手としている諸課題を解決しようとした。

魔法技能師開発第十研究所

2039年、東京に設立。現在は閉鎖。

第七研と同じく首都防衛の目的を兼ねて、大火力の攻撃に対する防御手段として空間に仮想構築物を生成する領域魔法を研究。その成果が多種多様な対物理障壁魔法。

また第十研は、第四研とは別の手段で魔法能力の引き上げを目指した。具体的には魔法演算領域そのものの強化ではなく、魔法演算領域を一時的にオーバークロックすることで必要に応じ強力な魔法を行使できる魔法師の開発に取り組んだ。ただしその成否は公開されていない。

これら10ヶ所の研究所以外にエレメンツ開発を目的とした研究所が2010年代から2020年代にかけて稼働していたが、現在は全て閉鎖されている。また国防軍には2002年に設立された陸軍総司令部直属の秘密研究機関があり独自に研究を続けている。九島烈は第九研に所属するまでこの研究機関で強化措置を受けていた。

The Ten Magician Research and Development Institutes

These are laboratories for magician development that were established one after the other in the AD 2030s by the Japanese gov't in response to the increasing international tensions leading to World War III. The labs' aim was not magic development but magician development, and so genetic research to manufacture the perfect magicians for their target magic was included.

From the First to the Tenth, ten laboratories were established. Five are currently in operation.

Below are their individual details.

First Laboratory

Established 2031 in Kanazawa. Currently shut down.

Its focus is the research of magic for direct interference of organic bodies in anti-personnel warfare. The vaporization magic [Rupture] is the derivative from that research. However, research on human movement control magic led to [Puppet Terrorists] (suicide terrorists manufactured from puppetized humans), and was halted.

Second Laboratory

Established 2031 in Awaji Island. In operation.

In contrast to First Institute magic, its focus is magic for direct interference of inorganic substances, especially the research on absorption-type magic that handle oxidation-reduction reactions.

Third Laboratory

Established 2032 in Atsugi. In operation.

In developing magicians that can independently handle multiple situations, it is implementing multicasting technology. Exploring limits on the maximum number of magics that can be cast synchronously and continuously, it is developing magicians able to cast multiple magics

synchronously.

Fourth Laboratory

Details unknown. Believed to be located near the borders of old Metro Tokyo and old Yamanashi prefecture. Believed to be established in 2033. Now shut down, but even its true status is unknown. Rumors exist that it was the only lab set up by an independent non-governmental sponsor which has a strong clout on nations, and it currently operates under said sponsor's support. There are also rumors that thanks to said sponsor, it was effectively operating before the AD 2020s.

Using mental interference magic, it aims to strengthen the magic calculation zone, the reservoir of the superpower so-called magic that resides in a magician's unconscious mind.

Fifth Laboratory

Established 2035 in Uwajima, Shikoku. In operation.

It researches on material phase manipulation magic. Though the technically easy fluid-state phase manipulation has turned mainstream, it has succeeded in solid-state phase manipulation. The result is the magic co-developed with the USNA, [Bahamut]. Along with fluid manipulation magic [Abyss], the laboratory won international fame for the magic development of two Strategic-class magics.

Sixth Laboratory

Established 2035 in Sendai. In operation.

It researches on heat control magic. Along with Eighth, it is strong on theoretical magic research but light on practical military magic research. Nevertheless, it was said that this lab alone (apart from Fourth) has conducted more genetic engineering experiments than any other magician development labs (true details on Fourth is unknown).

Seventh Laboratory

Established 2037 in Tokyo. Currently shut down.

It researches on magic with its focus on anti-unit warfare. Their results are colony control magics. This was in contrast to the non-militaristic Sixth, and it was set up as a magician development lab that took on an additional role of emergency capital defense.

Eighth Laboratory

Established 2037 in Kitakyushu. In operation.

It researches on magics that manipulate the four fundamental interactions (gravitational, electromagnetic, strong atomic, weak atomic forces). It is a lab even more focused on theoretical research than the Sixth. However, it differs strongly from the Sixth when it comes to JSDF relations. Eighth's research can easily lead to nuclear weapons development, so it has been quashing suspicions that it was developing nukes with JSDF approval.

Ninth Laboratory

Established 2037 in Nara. Currently shut down.

In a fusion of modern and ancient magic, by incorporating ancient magic know-how to modern magic, it aimed to resolve many issues that plague modern magic like fuzzy casting operation.

Tenth Laboratory

Established 2039 in Tokyo. Currently shut down.

In addition to capital defense like the Seventh, it focuses on wide-area magic that generates virtual structures in space as a defensive countermeasure to heavy firepower. The results are the barrier magics against a great variety of objects.

In addition the Tenth sought to increase the magic abilities with methods different from that of Fourth. Specifically, not by strengthening the magic calculation zone itself but by temporarily overclocking it, it dealt in developing magicians that can cast powerful magic when the situation calls for it. However the results were not publicized.

Apart from these ten there are other laboratories operating from AD 2010

to AD 2020 that sought to develop the Elements; all are currently shut down. There are also HQ-affiliated secret research groups put up in AD 2002 by the JSDF itself that are now independently continuing their research. Kudou Retsu himself underwent strength enhancement measures at these research groups until he joined the Ninth.

Chapter 0

There were only Ten Magician Development Laboratories established in the entire country, each with a different research subject.

For example, the first laboratory founded, Lab One, researched magic that directly interfered with living organisms in order to improve the efficiency of using magic as a weapon.

Lab Four used Mental Interference magic with the goal of strengthening the Magic Calculation area, the area of the brain that magicians used unconsciously as the source of their individual magic.

Lab Seven's goal was to develop magic that was used to battle against multiple opponents. The result was Herd Control magic.

And the research subject of Lab Nine, which invited a multitude of Ancient Magic practitioners to Nara, was the combination of Ancient and Modern magic.

The Ancient Magic users cooperated with Lab Nine out of their own free will; they hoped to improve the Ancient Magic that had been passed down with science and create newer stronger magic. However, from the beginning, Lab Nine's goal was to develop stronger Modern Magic by taking components of Ancient Magic and produce magicians that were superior to them as weapons.

As a result, the Ancient Magic users only ended up getting the techniques they used stolen, but understanding the details doesn't matter. It can only be said that it was inevitable Ancient Magic users would feel hostility to magicians produced by Lab Nine who bear the symbol "Nine" in their names.

This ingrained hostility still remains in Common Era 2096.

◊ ◊ ◊

Common Era 2096 June 25th, Monday. The retired general known as the Patriarch of the Japanese magic community, Kudou Retsu, was visiting the former site of Lab Nine with his eldest son, the present head of the Kudou clan, Kudou Makoto.

Lab Nine was closed as a national research facility soon after the end of the Third World War, but its functionality as a laboratory remained, even now. Currently, it was a civilian research facility jointly operated by the Kudou, Kuki and Kuzumi families — that had turned to researching perception type magics, a field that produced much slower results than developing the operator of the magic.

However, that was only its outer veneer. Certainly, research of perception type magic took place here. However, that was not the research subject of the current head of the lab.

Deep inside the research facility, Retsu and Makoto were guided to a large room, followed by human sized androids. There were four rows of four, sixteen in total. The androids had a thin column attached to their backs, a female form robot, "gynoid".

If this was a lab that developed 3H-Humanoid Home Helpers, this would probably not be a strange sight. There were other usages for them; for example, they might be used by a research facility developing androids for military purposes.

However, gynoids were unsuitable material for a magic research lab. —If you stuck to traditional thinking.

"What's the progress?"

Pride in his role as overseer of this research surfaced on their guide's face in response to Makoto's question.

"Parasite cultivation is going well. Successful installation into gynoids has risen to sixty percent. As you well know, the prototypes are sixteen in number."

"So it's reached the initial projections?"

"Yes."

The researcher's attitude as he answered would be felt as abnormal excitement if this was normal research, but neither Retsu nor Makoto were bothered by it. Certainly, the researcher's team's results were ones that he could definitely take pride in.

He probably noticed the signs of their approval. The head researcher's tongue began to wag with increasing fluency.

"The parasites cultivated now are kept in a completely dormant state in the gynoids according to the results of the loyalty programming. The initial resistance to the loyalty programming is no longer being observed. It looks like the most important barrier to actually using parasite dolls, successful application of the loyalty programming, is done. A performance test will be done whenever you order it."

The expectations that oozed out of the supervisor's remarks exceeded Makoto's predictions. Makoto considered the fact that it would probably take some time to put together a combat performance test in his mind, as such preparations hadn't been made.

"It's probably too early for a combat test. You say that they've undergone loyalty programming, so the number of tests on their autonomous behavior is insufficient?"

Retsu, not Makoto, replied to the researcher's proposal.

"It is not even understood how stable their use of spirit power is outside the experiment room."

"For that reason, the test…"

The supervisor who persisted due to his lack of understanding was brought to heel by Retsu with a gesture.

"Are you aware of the competition the magic high schools held annually in August? This year an event called Steeplechase Cross Country has been scheduled. In addition to physical obstacles, they must also overcome obstructions with magic aiming for the goal, a long distance obstacle race."

The supervisor immediately understood Retsu's true meaning.

"The Parasite Dolls will be used as an obstacle?"

"The defense force has too few people to spare for a competition for high school students, right? If Parasite Dolls are used, then military magicians cannot be injured from attacks by the students, and with the loyalty programming, there is no worry of the students being greatly wounded if the strength of the spirit power is controlled. It is an excellent chance to conduct a test of their practical usage."

"However, Elder, will the management committee agree? If the experiment's details are leaked, what kind of response will the public make? Considering that, I don't think they will give it an okay."

Makoto hadn't known Retsu's plan, but the management committee would definitely show anxiety about the public's reaction to high school students being used as guinea pigs. However, Retsu's determination was unshaken.

"No, the management committee has given their consent. The management committee has already yielded to military intervention in this year's event selection. At this point, no spirit remains to fight our demands."

However, Retsu did not touch on the countermeasures, in case the information was disclosed. It was clearly evident that he would not take the fall by accepting responsibility.

And if by some chance magic high school students were hurt by Parasite Dolls slipping from control, neither Retsu nor Makoto would say anything.

Leaving the details concerning the operational test to his son, Retsu returned to the Kudou family's principal residence in Ikoma. After arriving at the mansion, he immediately went to the room of Minoru, Makoto's youngest son.

Kudou Minoru was sixteen years old this year and a first year at the Magic University attached Second High School. Normally, he should be at school at this hour, but today he was staying home sick. —No, rather he was staying home sick today, again.

"Minoru, it's me."

Retsu called out as he knocked; after a moment of slight hesitation, the door to the room opened, showing a narrow view of the face of a pale boy. He had gentle, delicate features, but he probably wouldn't be mistaken for a girl. With looks like these, Kudou Minoru was the archetype of a 'pretty boy'.

"Ojiisama[1], please excuse my appearance."

His apology to his grandfather was spoken in a high voice, befitting his boyish appearance.

"You do not need to bother with such things. More importantly, is it alright for you not to be lying down?"

His words to his pajama clad grandson were not just pro forma. Grief was carved into Retsu's face; his concern for his grandson's condition was heartfelt.

Minoru replied to his grandfather's affection with a smile.

"I'm fine. My temperature has already gone do—"

However, just as he was trying to say 'gone down', he was assaulted with a severe cough and could not reach his trivial goal. The 'please do not worry about me' in his heart was betrayed by his body. This was always the case for him. Right now, the only thing Minoru could do was not show his respected grandfather his tears.

"Minoru, lie down."

Retsu, who was lightly rubbing the back of his coughing grandson, urged Minoru when the fit eased.

"Ojiisama… okay."

Minoru started to protest, but stopped. He knew exactly what kind of body he had and could not pretend otherwise. In the end, he obediently returned to bed; he was wise enough to understand that not worrying his grandfather was the more appropriate action.

Retsu propped Minoru's neck on a pillow himself and sat down on the chair he had moved. In a gentle voice, Retsu induced Minoru into conversation.

"Minoru, you don't need to be upset over your absences becoming somewhat numerous."

His consoling words were not a polite lie.

"Your magic power is among the most powerful in your generation in the world. Even if I compare you to the magic high school students taking part in the Nine Schools Competition, you have almost no equals among the students."

And, this was not the bias of a relative. Minoru possessed magic power befitting the grandson of Kudou Retsu.

"Thank you."

He probably understood that his grandfather genuinely acknowledged his talent. The hidden sorrow cleared from Minoru's face. Retsu's words had succeeded in cheering up his grandson.

However, they were also a little insensitive.

"The Nine Schools competition… I wish I could participate."

Minoru muttered not with self-pity but with longing. Those words struck a heavy blow to Retsu's heart.

"Minoru…"

If magic power was the only consideration, then Minoru would probably have a 100% chance of being picked as a representative for the Nine Schools Competition. However, that was only if he was able to go and compete. Minoru, a first year who spent a fourth of his days in his sickbed, would refuse to go even if Second High chose him out of consideration for the problems he would cause for the team.

"Please do not make that face, Ojiisama. After all, the Nine Schools Competition isn't the only stage for a contest of strength."

"That's true, you are smart as well. As a magician, perhaps as a magic artificer, you will have a number of chances to show your strength."

Retsu held back the pain that was boiling over in him to hide it from his grandson, who was smiling at him from his bed, and smiled back at him.

Minoru really wanted to take part in the Nine Schools Competition and he wanted to have a place in the sun where he could show off the talent he was born with; Retsu took his hand because he understood. But, at the same time, his grandson knew that such a chance may never come.

If he was healthy, then there would be no need to give up on the future.

If he had been less powerful, then it would be an idle wish.

The abundance of Minoru's talent only hurt him more. To Retsu, this was absurd.

And the one who had brought about this absurdity was not an invisible existence like gods or demons.

—The one who had consigned his grandson to this gruesome fate was his own son.

—The one who hadn't stopped him was his own self.

These self-condemning thoughts were gradually eroding Retsu's heart.

"Now that I think about it, Kyouko-neesan is also coming by to visit me today. She said she would also like to meet with you, Ojiisama."

"Really? That's good, Minoru."

"Yes."

Among Retsu's grandchildren, Minoru and Fujibayashi Kyouko were especially close. Minoru was really happy about the visit he spoke of.

The genuine smile finally surfacing on his grandson's face was all too pitiful, making it hard for Retsu to remain in this place. He placed his hand on his grandson's forehead to confirm that the fever was not all that great and stood up.

"Rest for a while, Minoru. If you do the fever will probably subside."

"Understood."

Receiving a reply that accepted his advice from his grandson, he forced himself to smile in return and left Minoru's room.

Retsu sunk his body down in his favorite armchair in his own study. So deep, he gave off the illusion that he was submerging into the soft leather cushions. To Retsu, it felt like the bottle of Armagnac[2] enshrined in the cabinet was beckoning him. He got up and, just as he took one step toward it, he returned to the chair again. Because he thought it was unforgivable for him to escape into drunkenness just now.

Retsu asked rhetorically, 'How could this kind of thing have happened?', and thought it illogical. It wasn't, after all, that uncommon a story. He had always dismissed it as only to be expected whenever it happened to others, so it was egotistical of him to bemoan desolately when it struck one of his own relatives… Retsu ruminated over this. However, no matter how

much he mockingly rebuked himself, this misfortune would not go away. Retsu knew this also.

Minoru's weak constitution was a byproduct of gene manipulation. He was a magician with a modified body — a human created with genes remodeled to strengthen the magic factor.

Makoto was a father who recklessly carried out genetic manipulation on his own son; in a nutshell, his hang-ups about Retsu were to blame. Ever since Makoto was young, he had an inferiority complex about his own magic power being so much less than Retsu's. His own children were also ordinary by Ten Master Clan standards and he despaired over the fact that their talents only slightly exceeded his own.

Looking objectively, both Makoto and his children were endowed with sufficiently strong magic power. He just picked a bad target for comparison. Retsu had observed a successful increase in power in the 10 percent who survived remodeling and even without taking such a risk, Makoto certainly displayed ample ability. Retsu had repeatedly told that to his son and heir, but he could not get Makoto to comprehend it.

When Makoto's obsession with power turned into despair, a madness developed inside him. He became fixated on the warped idea that if he could not get a heir who possessed high magic ability naturally, then he should artificially create one by his own hand.

Furthermore, to create the strongest magician, he planned to make an improved crossbreed of Kudou genes using the technology of artificial insemination and an artificial womb. And the one who was created was Minoru. Officially, the fertilized egg used as the base for the creation of Minoru was an egg from Makoto's wife inseminated with Makoto's sperm. However, in actuality, it was not such a respectable matter as that.

Minoru's father was genetically Kudou Makoto.

Genetically, his mother was Makoto's youngest sister who had married into the Fujibayashi clan.

In short, Minoru was Kyouko's half-brother — a child born from two actual siblings.

He was not a child of incest. Makoto and his younger sister did not have sexual intercourse; all they did was supply the sperm and the egg. Even

so, that did not change the fact that he was the child of two blood related siblings.

Minoru's physical condition could be a defect in his genetic modification or it could be due to inbreeding, the cause wasn't known. Just that, due to his unusual birth, Minoru was irrevocably cursed.

In terms of magic power strengthening, the modification was a success.

The talents of what would be a genius of the highest level among the currently known magicians were embedded in Minoru. His magic power rivaled that of Shiba Miyuki and Angelina Sirius.

However, due to his decidedly weak constitution, Minoru couldn't demonstrate that magic power consistently.

It wasn't because he was feeble like Itsuwa Mio; when Minoru wasn't sick, he could utilize his magic as he wished. Nevertheless, the opportunities for a magician whose body needed to be put on bed rest for every trifling thing to shine were limited.

It wasn't just that; he might not live long enough to become an adult. As a modified body magician, even though he was created as a living weapon, his youngest grandchild could not accomplish this. The curse that afflicted Minoru had been brought about by the twistedness of modern magic development that constructed magicians as weapons. After over ten years of anguish, Retsu had reached that conclusion.

—The usage of magicians as weapons must be stopped.

—More importantly, children like Minoru must not be created.

Retsu fortified his determination for what might be the hundredth or thousandth time.

Chapter 1

The last week of June. Regardless of the fact that it was after school, the proximity of the quarterly exams meant that the sounds of keystrokes, the buzz of electricity and even hushed voices doing question and answer drills fluttered about the National Magic University affiliated First High School.

It was roughly an hour since the last of the afternoon instruction had finished. After the passage of that not very long amount of time, Tatsuya stood in front of Azusa, who was overseeing things.

"President, the information as well as the proposals of the self-governing committee and the Public Morals committee have all been sorted into the approved directories; please confirm this by tomorrow."

"Understood. …Umm, Shiba-kun, you really don't mind processing it to the end?"

"Not at all, do you need me to stay?"

Perhaps because she trusted his abilities, or maybe simply because it was troublesome, Tatsuya curtly shook his head at Azusa's words, which admitted that she had passed off most of her work to him.

"Then, excuse me."

"Thank you for all your work."

The time was nowhere near the closing of the gate. All the other officers were continuing to work and made no move to get up and leave. Nevertheless, Azusa accepted Tatsuya's "declaration of his intent to escape" as if it was only natural and thanked him.

The truth was that Tatsuya's early withdrawal was at Azusa's direction; she had asked him to do it.

There were currently a total of six members on the student council: the president, the two vice presidents, treasurer, and the two secretaries. That was one more than it had at the same time last year. Under normal circumstances, the workload would have been decreased by one person; however, with the addition of Tatsuya, things had turned out a little too much for the better.

In other words, Tatsuya's ability to handle work was too strong.

The Student Council entrusted the work of controlling necessary operations for management of the school to a few committees. Not only magic high schools did this — it was the normal way for schools to operate at the end of the twenty-first century.

However, control of the important matters of school management were by no means left to students. Major disturbances like the 'Blanche incident' that occurred on the April of last year were actually quite rare. The work of the Student Council was almost all simple decisions, time consuming work of making small necessary adjustments and clerical work.

And if Tatsuya exhibited his full ability to take care of matters, he could unfortunately finish off all the adjustments and clerical work easily all by himself. That would mean no work for the other officers and that would mean that they would lose the chance to accumulate experience doing the work.

The most anyone can remain an officer on the Student Council is only two and a half years. If Tatsuya did everything, then the underclassmen wouldn't learn the job and his fellow second years might forget how to do their jobs while the upperclassmen wouldn't know the current arrangements. And, if Tatsuya was absent for a long time, the work of the Student Council wouldn't be performed properly. Consequently, the management of the school wouldn't go smoothly.

The risk of that was actually quite infinitesimal, but just the potential alone was extraordinarily unpalatable. So in the first month, April, President Azusa and Treasurer Isori came to a decision. And so, the pair plucked up their nerve and asked Tatsuya 'to ease off a bit' for that reason. At their wit's end, they came up with an 'approved early leave-taking' solution.

This was quite convenient for Tatsuya. Originally, Tatsuya had intended to spend time after school reading unpublished research documents that the National Magic University disclosed to affiliated high schools and training. He had not wished for the positions of Public Morals committee member or Student Council officer (and the accompanying duties). Finishing work early left him with a lot of time he could use.

"Miyuki."

"Yes, I'll wait here."

They had repeated the actions so many times, they were well beyond the point where he had to say that he would come to pick her up.

Secretary Honoka watched Tatsuya depart with dissatisfaction.

The cold gaze of the other secretary, Izumi, as she watched Tatsuya depart only said 'you darn slacker'; she was unaware that Miyuki was quietly glaring at her.

At this hour, club activities were not yet over. Consequently, the locker room was empty when Tatsuya changed into his gym clothes, and after he put his uniform in a bag and into his own locker, he went to the training forest behind the school.

This man-made forest wasn't just for practicing magic. In order to fulfill the needs of students who aspired to take the path of soldiers, policemen and rescue workers for physical training, the density of all the trees and the ups and downs of the ground were all calculated for usefulness; the ponds, the sandy soil, the running paths and the rest were carefully positioned. Also, various devices and instruments were installed. As a result, it served as a base for activities of more than just clubs that took part in competitions; they shared it with clubs centered purely on outdoor physical activities.

The club Tatsuya was visiting was one of those that didn't take part in magical competitions.

"Yo, Tatsuya."

Before he could greet them, his friend's voice rang out.

"Tatsuya-niisama."

Perhaps the voice alerted her, as Minami went to Tatsuya, a big kettle in her hand, the sound of metal grating accompanying her greeting.

"Glad to see you, Leo. Looks like you're trying hard too, Minami."

Tatsuya raised his hand to reply to Leo and called out to Minami, and then,

"By the way, where's Chief Agata?"

asked about the whereabouts of the person in charge.

"Here."

The answer to that question came from the man himself. He was not on one of the paths maintained for running within the forest; the figure of Agata Kenshiro, the chief of the Mountain Club Leo belonged to, emerged from the overgrown undergrowth beneath the trees. Tatsuya slipped through the male freshmen and sophomore club members moaning from exhaustion on the ground and bowed a greeting before Agata.

"Chief, may I join in again, today?"

"Sure, I'm taking it easy. If you can, could you work the freshmen a little for me."

This remark made half the club members who had been transformed into living corpses shudder in surprise, but there was no one who was able to stand up and make a run for it.

"I see. How about once around the course."

"Just one more time, hmm. That's easy… Race him, you guys."

After Agata laughed happily upon hearing Tatsuya's answer, he looked around at the miserable club members who hadn't been able to rise up until now.

"It's only a ten kilometer run through the forest! Look at Saijou, isn't he energetic."

"…Please don't compare us to Leo."

One of the second year members just barely managed to talk back. Somehow, he revived enough to speak; to actually get up was still beyond him.

"Don't whine! The third years have already run one extra lap. Come on, how long are you going to lie down. You guys aren't dead yet."

Unenthusiastic cries rose up from here and there, as one by one the second years mustered their strength and got their bodies up. Naturally, they were reluctant to pretend that they were dead.

However, only the second years got up. The first year members didn't have enough remaining strength to persevere.

"Nothing for it… Sakurai!"

Minami, who had been patiently hanging back, replied to Agata's call with a 'yes', took the kettle she had temporarily placed at her feet, and trotted over to the side of the nearest of her fellow first years.

"Do it."

"Yes."

At Agata's direction, Minami tilted the kettle in her hand.

"Ah, Hot!"

The first year whose face was drenched by the liquid poured from the kettle rolled over away from Minami's feet, got up, and stumbled away from Minami.

"Boiling water…?"

Leo, who had come up next to him, laughed and shook his head at the question Tatsuya unintentionally murmured.

"Nope. It's 45 to 46 degrees at most. That level of heat won't scald."

The female club member sitting down in the shade of the trees only snickered without a trace of concern. So it was probably true that it wasn't a big deal; nevertheless, Tatsuya thought it was a fairly violent method.

"It's said that at the end of the last century, they would bathe rugby players who collapsed in the middle of a match with water from a kettle to rouse their fighting spirit."

Agata, who had been listening to Tatsuya's and Leo's conversation, offered up that bit of trivia.

"Was it your idea, Chief Agata, to make it hot and not cold water?"

"Because at this time of year, being soaked with cold water would feel good to those slugs."

Agata announced his internal logic to answer Tatsuya's question. Before their eyes, Minami baptized the boys who were her fellow first years with hot water, one by one.

There were a number of ropes strung above the pond. Narrow logs dangled from them as Tatsuya smoothly used them to advance through the air; the equally composed Leo at his side spoke to him.

"Hey, Tatsuya. Why did Sakurai-san join my club?"

"That's just started bugging you now?"

"Naw, I've wondered about it before."

As Leo said, Minami was a proper member of the mountain club in contrast to Tatsuya, who was not a member and was just using their facilities. —It's somewhat tangential, but as a condition for being allowed to take part in the mountain club's activities, Tatsuya had to tune the club members' CADs and his fellow second years who were club members called him things like an 'honorary member' and the like.

Back to the main topic.

"With Sakurai's magic power, didn't she get a lot of invitations from a lot of clubs?"

It was just as Leo said, so Leo's skepticism was natural. Minami's magic power had been revealed to the whole school in April's 'Stellar Furnace Experiment', but even during newcomer invitation week, the top scorers on the entrance exam were noted by each club. Normally, she should have joined a club that took part in magic competitions.

"She said it was because she wanted to train her body."

Tatsuya answered the question with a half-truth. After landing on the opposite bank, while using the narrow footholds that had become stepping stones in the prepared ground to run across, they conversed effortlessly.

"I think she's already in good enough shape for a first year girl."

Leo's point was expected. Because Minami had been raised as a combat magician by the main house of the Yotsuba, her physical abilities shouldn't be something that could be improved further.

However, in terms of being good enough, her magical ability was also already more than good enough for a high school student. There was even less reason to join a club to improve that.

"Minami probably doesn't think so."

Minami wasn't just a member of the mountain club, she had also joined the cooking club. Her primary reason for joining clubs was to waste time so that she could leave with Tatsuya and the rest of the Student Council — with her mistress, Miyuki, to be exact. Tatsuya was scrupulously keeping this other half of the truth unvoiced.

For magic high schools that put emphasis on practical skills, the Nine Schools Competition — the great tournament that all the magic high schools competed in — was a very important event. This was true not just for the school administration but for the students as well, due to the results of the Nine Schools Competition being linked to their career paths. Nevertheless, this was not in the least unusual. As a result, it is perhaps only natural that even more effort is put into it than the quarterly exams.

The diligent in all things Nakajou Azusa, president of the Student Council of First High School, in order to not let the individual student's enthusiasm go to waste, had started to work on the preparations for the Nine Schools Competition a month earlier than had been done in other years. As a result, she anticipated that there would not be a flurry of activity right before the quarterly exams and that the preparations would proceed in a rather relaxed fashion.

Until today, Monday July 2, 2096, when a totally unexpected notification caught her completely off guard.

On that day, Tatsuya and Miyuki went to the Student Council room after school as usual. The quarterly exams were next week; however, that had nothing to do with the activities of the student council. For the already mentioned reason, compared to most years, the duties of the Student Council officers had lessened. —Not that this had anything to do with the siblings; they were not the kind to do overnight cramming sessions, so the uneasiness, discontent and grumbling had nothing to do with them.

Anyway, immediately after Tatsuya opened the door to the Student Council room as usual,

The gloomy atmosphere wafting out of the room made Tatsuya unconsciously stop.

"Onii-sama? What is…"

It wasn't just Tatsuya. Miyuki, who was peeking out from behind his back, was too shocked to finish saying the simple sentence, "What is the matter?" Right before their eyes, Azusa was emitting 'it's the end of the world' despair while covering her head.

"Oh. It's you two, thank you for coming."

From in front of the president's desk, Isori spoke to them with a face dark with despair. That prompted Tatsuya to muster the determination to finally take a step into the moribund air.

"You're welcome, Isori-senpai. What the heck happened?"

Once he made a decision, he took the direct route. That was Tatsuya's style. Ignoring Azusa, who was covering her head, Tatsuya asked Isori for information.

"Umm, well…"

"The details of this year's competition have been delivered from the Nine Schools Competition's management committee."

Instead of the inarticulate Isori, Azusa, who still wasn't showing her face, answered Tatsuya's question.

"Oh, it's already that time."

"The particulars will be made available on the public website, tomorrow."

"I see. So, what is the problem?"

Apparently, he realized that the details contained a problem worth covering one's head over. However, what on earth could the problem be that caused this extravagant display of despair? Tatsuya was unable to take the option of not finding out.

"Everything!"

Perhaps, Azusa had been waiting for that question. She vigorously lifted her head and began pouring out complaints like they were curses.

"Changes to the event program are included in the information notices!"

"…What has changed?"

Certainly, that was bad news. First High's Student Council had made preparations based on the assumption that the program had not been changed from last year. However, although the schedule had been fixed in recent years, there was no rule that it couldn't be changed. Due to the fact that the finalized event listing was sent about a month before the competition, it wasn't against the rules to notify them of a change in the roster of events today.

"Three events!"

However, Tatsuya was still surprised by the answer Azusa gave in a shrieking voice.

"Speed Shooting, Crowd Ball, and Battle Board are out; the newly added events are Row and Gunner, Shield Down and Steeplechase Cross-country."

There were six events in all and half of them had been changed. Furthermore, due to the nature of the new events — the type of magic that needed to be used was pretty different. This meant it was probably necessary to change the selection of the athletes.

However, it was premature of him to make decisions. Azusa's answer didn't end there.

"What's more, athletes can only take part in two events if one of them is Steeplechase Cross-country! Additionally, Ice Pillars Break, Row and Gunner, and Shield Down are divided into solo and pair events."

Azusa pounded on the desk with both hands for emphasis. Tatsuya could vaguely understand how she was driven to such an extreme. This represented a major change; this had a dramatic influence on the way each school conducted the Nine Schools Competition. Not just athlete selection, strategy and tactics would have to be reworked as well.

In short, all the early preparation they had done was useless. Preparing beforehand had backfired on them. It was inevitable that Azusa became this distraught. Tatsuya thought she had good self control not to panic.

"Umm, Onii-sama."

From behind him, Miyuki diffidently spoke to Tatsuya, who was considering what to say to the heavily breathing Student Council president.

"Row and Gunner? Shield Down? Steeplechase Cross-country… what kind of events are they?"

Miyuki was probably going to be entered into Ice Pillars Break; there was almost no chance that she would take part in Row and Gunner or Shield Down. However, she would probably have to enter Steeplechase Cross-country, the only other event she was allowed to enter, and she was interested in the other two events as a Nine Schools Competition athlete. Her curiosity was only natural.

"They don't have to adopt the rules I know of, but…"

After making that preface, Tatsuya answered his sister's question.

"Row and Gunner: Row is short for rower and Gunner means a shooter. In the pair category, one person acts as the 'rower' of an unmotorized boat along a water channel, and the other acts as the 'gunner', who will shoot down targets either on the banks of the channel or moving on the water channel itself. Both the time taken to reach the goal and the number of targets shot will determine the score. In solo, a single person probably acts as both the 'rower' and 'gunner'. The event was originally part of the USNA's naval curriculum."

After confirming that Miyuki had no questions, Tatsuya switched to explaining the next event.

"Shield Down: a close combat event that uses shields. It's usually held in a ring that is a bit higher than the floor or surface. You win by destroying the opponent's shield, stealing the opponent's shield or expelling the opponent from the ring. Additionally, physical attacks on one's opponent are forbidden but are allowed against the shield. In short, magic is used on your own shield, your own body and to attack your opponent's shield, and using magic to expel your opponent from the ring is allowed."

"Can you hit your opponent's shield with your own shield to expel your opponent from the ring?"

"Of course."

"There's an additional rule: if you can get the opponent to release the shield for five seconds, you win even if you don't take the shield."

After Tatsuya answered Miyuki's question, Isori provided the supplemental explanation. Tatsuya waited for a bit but no further supplements or amendments came, so he switched to the next one.

"Steeplechase Cross-country is as the name says. In short, a cross-country obstacle course race. You compete by clearing obstacles placed in a forest in a time race. It's an infantry training exercise held in mountains and forests. Obstacles can be natural or man-made, and automatic gun emplacements or magic obstacles can be used."

"That's an extremely difficult event…"

Tatsuya scowled as he agreed with Miyuki's honest assessment.

"Row and Gunner and Shield Down aside, Steeplechase Cross-country is not an event high school students should participate in. What on earth is the management committee thinking?"

Tatsuya muttered like he wanted to scold them. Just then, Isori added some more bizarre information.

"Furthermore, all the second and third year athletes, male and female, can potentially enter. Actually, everyone but the first years can participate."

"…If the athletes are not extremely well trained in countermeasures, there will be a huge quantity of dropouts."

By dropouts, Tatsuya didn't just mean out of the competition, he meant out of magic high school. They probably didn't realize he meant that possibility.

"Oh my…!"

Azusa made that cry of despair and once more collapsed on the desk radiating hopelessness.

The Student Council's work wasn't just to prepare for the Nine Schools competition; a portion of the high school's management duties were consigned to the Student Council to give them practical work experience. Not just in magic high schools, but in all high schools. Not performing those duties would hinder the smooth management of the school. Therefore, even at a time like this, they had to get at least the minimum of the work done; when Honoka, who was acting as an envoy, and Izumi, who had been delayed by practical skills training, showed their faces in the Student

Council room, both Tatsuya and Miyuki were wrestling with the work of the Student Council.

—Azusa still had her head buried in the desk, however.

—Isori was making great efforts to pull her out of her depression, however.

"Since it's become like this, all we can do is choose the athletes again."

"…"

"Isn't it good that there is still time to do it! Besides, not all of our preparations are useless!"

"…"

"Somehow we will surely be able to come up with countermeasures to Steeplechase Cross-country! So, hey, Nakajou-san. Now—"

He engulfed Azusa from behind; he was trying to at least release her from the world she had trapped herself in and Isori was gently caressing her shoulders, when,

"—Kei?"

he was frozen by a cold voice coming from behind him.

"…Kanon?"

With awkward movements, Isori turned around to face the staircase that led to Public Morals Headquarters. Just as he expected, his fiancée was standing right there. —While she was smiling, the veins on her forehead had surfaced.

"Keeeiiii-. What are you doingggg?"

"Uh, umm, by what?"

"Engulfing Nakajou-san like that, what on earth did you intend to doooo?"

It wasn't a sincere smile, it was more like a seal that had been pasted on. Kanon's actual feelings were quite easy to read.

"A misunderstanding! It's a misunderstanding!"

Isori earnestly shook his head. On the other hand, Azusa took refuge in a corner of the room. Rather than next month's Nine Schools Competition, they should probably choose to deal with the carnage occurring before their eyes. But as for the response from the other members, Izumi, for example, was viewing Isori, who was desperately making excuses, with annoyance, but was this from tiredness or was this from shock; she was not looking at the work in progress screen — but rather at Miyuki, who was reading reports at her desk.

For Izumi, Miyuki was an oasis for her heart. When she was tired from work, when she was deadlocked in confusion and when she was uncomfortably nervous, she would actually feel her heart warm when Miyuki entered into her field of vision. A lover's quarrel anyone would avoid was making Izumi's will to do anything gradually sink to the ground. She was covertly trying to take a look at Miyuki which (in Izumi logic) was an indispensable step to recovering her motivation.

Just then, perhaps by some kind of coincidence, the gazes of Izumi, who was turning, and Miyuki, who was looking up, met directly. To Izumi, who was beginning to be flustered and was thinking of excuses, Miyuki gave a troubled smile and flicked her eyes toward Isori and Kanon. And this time, Miyuki gave Izumi a look.

Izumi had asked the 'Onee-sama' she loved and respected, 'What should we do?' with her eyes. Or so she felt. And Miyuki had responded with one slight shake of her head, 'We should do nothing' and gave a bewildered smile.

As per their usual after school routine, Tatsuya and his friends stopped by their favorite coffee shop, 'Eine Brise', on their way home today. The group included the eight second years and one first year, Minami. On the way there, Izumi looked like she wanted to join them, but Kasumi, her elder twin, was completely uninterested, so it was inevitable that they went straight home. Minami was pretty uncomfortable being the only first year among upperclassmen; however, since she was diligent in her duties, she couldn't choose another option.

Today, Mikihiko had suggested the after school coffee break. It was rare for him to be this proactive, so it felt like he wanted to say something or ask about something.

And as expected, immediately after they finished ordering, Mikihiko pelted a question at Tatsuya.

"Tatsuya, is it true that the roster of events in the Nine Schools Competition have been changed?"

"You sure got wind of that quick."

It was hard to tell if the affirmative answer to the question Tatsuya gave was praise or scorn.

"Who did you hear about it from?"

"The committee chief and Isori-senpai discussed it."

Mikihiko did not reveal his source; Shizuku volunteered it. They were both members of the Public Morals committee. In short, they had eavesdropped on them in the committee headquarters.

"But, we don't know the full details."

"Eh, the events have changed? What to what?"

Erika took the bait of Mikihiko's unnecessary explanation.

"A notice addressed to the Student Council came today. Speed Shooting, Crowd Ball and Battle Board are out; Row and Gunner, Shield Down and Steeplechase Cross-country have been added."

"What type of competitions are those?"

After Tatsuya gave the same explanation he gave to Miyuki to Erika, she grinned happily.

"Hey… those sound like fun. Especially Shield Down."

Erika's excitement showed in her voice.

"Oh, really… they seem kind of scary to me."

Looking at her ecstatic friend, Mizuki made a diffident protest.

"Yes… up to last year, all the events they held avoided direct clashes between athletes."

"Even Monolith Code was like that."

Perhaps Miyuki was thinking the same thing; she promptly chimed in her agreement to Honoka's remark.

"But I think Steeplechase Cross-country is more dangerous than Shield Down."

"Yes. Onii-sama said that, as well."

Miyuki nodded as she agreed with Shizuku's interjection.

"In a forest without paths, even moving around is dangerous if you're not used to it. With not just physical obstacles, but magical ones as well, it would be strange if no one got hurt."

"Right. A very experienced guide is needed for hiking in the mountains even with roads. It's too reckless to do a speed competition in an unknown forest."

Leo and Mikihiko voiced critical, or rather negative, opinions based on their individual experiences.

"Hey, Tatsuya. I get the feeling that the events they added this year are awfully military-ish, you agree?"

Everyone there was somewhat in agreement with Leo's words.

"It's true."

Once again, he was right not to try and fool his friends. And so, all Tatsuya could do was nod. Without reluctance, Tatsuya explained what he had surmised and what he based it on.

"It's probably an effect of the Yokohama Incident. After last year's incident, people connected to our national defense affairs have acknowledged the usefulness of magicians to the military and this is an attempt to influence our education in that direction."

"That's exactly what the anti-magician activists in the media are protesting."

Erika jeered with an evil grin. Tatsuya couldn't just smile at her mockery.

"Yes but their timing is not the only thing that is bad. Why are they making such easily understood changes… And, I think adding provocation to the current international situation is unnecessary."

Honoka's and Mizuki's faces clouded with unease in response to Tatsuya's words.

"…Well that doesn't matter, it's going to get busy from now on."

Perhaps to change the mood, Tatsuya continued to act as if he was already bored with the topic. This was not a complete pretense. In the current situation, Tatsuya would have to do without his pleasant after school routine at least until the Nine Schools Competition was over.

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The students of First High School were not the only ones to show annoyance at the change in the event program of the Nine Schools Competition. In the mansion of the Ichijou clan of the Ten Master Clans, students of Third High School were also pouring out complaints like their fellow second years.

"To suddenly… unbelievable."

"Absolutely."

"No matter how much they say it's within the rules… it would have been better to inform us earlier with such a large scale change, right?"

"Definitely."

"And we already started practicing the ousted events. We even got as far as refining the activation sequences… all the hard work we've done til now have been a waste of time."

"True."

"We have to redo everything from the athlete selection on… eh, Masaki, are you listening!?"

Perhaps feeling that he was being repeatedly given absent minded words of agreement, Kichijouji, who had been grumbling about the notice from the Nine Schools Competition management committee, flared up at Masaki.

"Naturally. I'm sorry if you felt I was ignoring you."

However, it seemed that Masaki's mental state was even less calm; his tone as he answered was quite pointed.

"…Sorry, I was venting."

"No, I'm the one at fault. It's natural for you to be upset, George."

And with that, the pair were apparently able to release their anger and cool their heads. The thorny mood promptly disappeared; their need for fruitless agitation was satisfied.

"Anyway, no matter how much we grumble, there's nothing we can do about it."

Masaki spoke as if he was telling himself that and,

"Right… First, we re-pick the athletes. Ahh…"

Kichijouji sighed as he accepted it.

"Right… we have to think about what this means, George."

However, the next words that came out of Masaki's mouth were packed with more than consolation.

"What do you mean?"

Naturally, the suspicions on Kichijouji's face as he questioned Masaki only made him seem more earnest.

"The events that have been added to the program all have strong ties to actual combat. I think that is more to our advantage than First High's."

"I see… First High puts a lot of emphasis on achieving a high ranking international license, they don't seem to stress combat techniques that have no bearing on improving practical magic skills."

"Although, there are exceptions like Sawaki, the Magic Arts athlete, and 'that guy'. But, if we look at the student bodies in general, ours is the one that excels in magic combat techniques and as a group of athletes in the Nine Schools Competition, the odds are in our favor."

"I… see. But."

Kichijouji agreed with Masaki's opinion but not unconditionally.

"The outcome of the Nine Schools Competition is not determined by the average rankings of the participating athletes. Only the top ranks in the individual events determine it. Under the rules of the competition, other than Mirage Bat, the athletes have to enter into either the solo or pair competitions for the event. The key is deciding who is going solo and who is going to form a pair."

"I see. Now, there are limitations on the duplication of entries this time. It's as you say, George. How we divide the athletes into solo and pair competitions is going to have a big impact. For example, you and I would form the best pair. However—"

Masaki suddenly paused and looked toward the door. There was no knock. However, his intuition was not mistaken.

"Hello, Shinkurou-kun."

The next instant, Akane, the eldest daughter of the Ichijou clan and Masaki's younger sister, entered the room as she called out in a lively voice.

"You… knock before entering my room, like I'm always telling you."

As she listened to the lecture from her brother that had already become routine, Akane took iced tea and gum syrup from the tray in her hand and placed them in front of Kichijouji.

"Here, Shinkurou-kun. One gum syrup is fine, right?"

"Uh, thank you, Akane-chan."

"You're welcome. You don't want one, Nii-san? A drink from the sister who entered without knocking."

And Akane demurely looked at her brother as she spoke, the one who was addressed answered with a sour look.

"…Put it down."

It probably goes without saying that it was a joke. Akane smiled as she offered iced coffee to Masaki. It can be said without sarcasm that Akane was a properly raised young girl.

This kind of exchange was just the traditional practice between the siblings.

"Akane-chan, you just got back?"

Therefore, not even Kichijouji was bothered by it at this point. What was bothering him was Akane's attire.

"Yeah, that's right."

She innocently nodded. Eventually Akane noticed and an 'ah' surfaced on her face.

"I see. This is the first time you've seen me in my summer uniform."

Her tray now empty, Akane twirled around. The pleated skirt and sailor collar constructed from light cloth for summer use danced lightly.

"So? Does it suit me?"

Akane's bashful smile was surprisingly 'girlish'. Kichijouji knew that by becoming a middle school student his friend's sister had made a radical transformation from 'child' to 'girl' as he watched. However, even though he knew that, unexpectedly confronting it shocked him.

"Ye-yes, it looks good on you."

"Really, I'm glad, thank you."

The graceless compliment wrung out from Kichijouji made Akane supremely happy and she gently smiled. Half a year ago, she would have clapped her hands in joy. Even her small habits were now infused with 'girlishness'.

A white and light blue sailor uniform with fashionable half sleeves. The traditional colors and uniform of the prestigious middle school made the girl especially radiant and Kichijouji's eyes unconsciously narrowed. …And directly beside him he felt an accusing disappointed stare.

"George, just like I…"

"You're wrong!"

Kichijouji reflexively denied Masaki's accusation. If the two of them were alone, there probably wouldn't be any problem with his response. However, it was unwise in front of the third party present.

"Hmmm… jealous, Nii-san?"

Having the one she liked promptly deny 'that he had any romantic interest in her' would hurt anyone. That had no relation to age. It had everything to do with the passion Akane acknowledged she felt.

However, she childishly vented her wrath on Masaki rather than Kichijouji himself, or perhaps her passion for him kept her from seeking her beloved's ire.

"Don't say stupid things."

Whichever one it was, all Masaki could do was refute it bluntly. He didn't feel like making a serious attempt to communicate and the other side became even more sullen about being treated like a child.

"Hmm, a misunderstanding you say."

Up to this point, their words were at their usual level of abusiveness. Afterwards, the normal pattern would be Akane saying 'I'm not letting you have Shinkurou-kun all to yourself!' or something equally cutting and Kichijouji would mediate between the siblings.

"I was listening."

However, today things went differently.

"So what?"

Akane laughed smugly at Masaki's objection.

"You invited Shinkurou-kun to be your dance partner, Nii-san!"

"What the!?"

"Eeh!?"

This shocked not just Masaki but Kichijouji as well. The pair had absolutely no memory of doing anything like that.

"Nii-san, didn't you say that you and Shinkurou-kun would form the best couple."

"You, eavesdropped—"

"Disgusting."

Masaki's words were chopped off as Akane directed a scornful look at her brother.

"It's counterproductive to have two males together."

"No. Wait a minute, Akane-chan! You misunderstood. It's a misunderstanding!"

Being sneered at by a middle school girl made Kichijouji begin to make frantic desperate denials. Making him even more desperate, his social position was at stake.

And in the room of the heir to the Ichijou clan, while the master of the room, Masaki, continued to be frozen out of shock, Kichijouji frantically protested their innocence for a full two hours straight.

Chapter 2

July 3, Tuesday morning, one night after the notifications that brought all the magic schools into bewilderment and mayhem. At the JSDF 101st Brigade base commander's office in Tsuchiura at old Ibaraki prefecture, its commander, Major General Saeki Hiromi, had summoned for the Independent Magic-equipped Battalion Commander, Major Kazama Harunobu.

Maj. Gen. Saeki is a female flag officer turning 59 this year. A talented female staff officer, due to shades of silver radiating from her grey hair she has earned monikers like the [Silver Fox]. But then, she looked like a kindly grade school principal on first glance, way different from the image of a fox.

Within the JSDF she's also known for her extreme anti-Ten Master Clan criticism. Even so, she completely doesn't have any of the emotional opposition or physiological hatred against magicians. She's just a person who keeps on raising alarm flags on the over-dependency to a private framework like the Ten Master Clans for national defense. For that reason Saeki was seen as a political rival to Kudou Retsu, but it wasn't apparent at a glance.

Her association with Kazama goes way back to the Great Indochina War.

In this war where the Great Asian Alliance advanced south to conquer the entire Indochina peninsula, Kazama ignored the JSDF high command's plans and directly intervened in this war. Thanks to his guerrilla tactics the Alliance's invasion was halted, bringing in USNA and New Soviet intervention, and finally forcing the Alliance back without them gaining their objectives.

Kazama was hailed for his actions as the world's expert in jungle warfare. But it was Saeki, an information analyst at JSDF GHQ at that time who supported an almost isolated and helpless Kazama with intelligence and operation plans from both sides, who was the very reason for his military successes.

And for the unauthorized action in the Great Indochina war -- that time Kazama's orders were to secretly interfere with the Alliance's southern advance, although the part [secretly] was struck out under the pretext of [unauthorized action] -- Kazama was shut out of promotion, but there was no censure for his supporter Saeki, official and unofficial. She was

showered with praises and even the upper echelons were impressed with her.

Four years ago, just after the Okinawa defensive, Saeki's plans were adopted to establish the 101st Brigade and she was commissioned as its first commander. She then summoned Kazama, frozen at Captain, made him Major and gave him command of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

Interactions like these were rare for the two, but bonds run deep between them. Even with their compatible personalities and remaining good friends, the *intention* was for a superior talking together with a junior. Even without that, IMB's orders were to do test runs on new magic equipment and magic tactics. 101st Brigade's objective was to establish a magic power independent from the Ten Master Clans, and Kazama's unit was its key. It's natural that Saeki and Kazama would be sticking together.

And in this commander's office, the two can freely exchange talk about top-secret imminent military actions.

"Major Kazama, are you aware of the sweeping game changes in this year's National Magic High School Goodwill Games, the Nine School Competitions?"

And so Saeki started their morning talk with this question.

"Only the fact that they did such an action. Was it formally announced?"

As he asked back, Kazama uneasily remembered something. Saeki possesses weak magical talent, but she's no magician. She's well known for including the "magic" factor in strategic planning and using it at a tactical level, but she shouldn't have any interest in a noncombat magic competition.

"I see the news comes slow to you, Major. There was an official notification addressed to all magic high schools yesterday," a sitting Saeki said as she handed document sheets to Kazama, standing "at-ease" in front of her. She made a point to hand him the physical papers to prevent her own handwritten annotations to be leaked to the networks. But it looked like a practical-minded Saeki's habit.

For a short while the sound of papers being shuffled filled the commander's office. Kazama, after very quickly reaching the last page, raised his head and inquired about the information with a look.

"What do you think?"

It seemed they haven't arrived yet on the real issue at hand. Urging Saeki on would lead nowhere, so Kazama decided to just go follow her lead.

"It's a straight-out military training regimen."

"... I doubt if you have said it all but I'm with you on this one."

Saeki pressed a button at the desk edge as if she recalled something. A collapsible chair popped out from a wall, then positioned itself behind Kazama. Saeki motioned him to sit down.

It looked like a signal that this was going to be a long talk. Kazama bowed before he unfolded the chair and settled down in front of Saeki.

"This year's game lineup changes is a direct result of last year's incident at Yokohama. The JSDF wants to reconfirm the magicians' effective combat strength, and so they're pushing for ability development towards that goal."

"I believe anyone can figure that one out even if he's out of the loop."

Saeki nodded once at what Kazama pointed out, then continued on.

"The Japan Magic Association has shown only token resistance to this demand from the JSDF."

Kazama showed an inquisitive look towards Saeki.

"*That old man* didn't put up any resistance?"

Saeki slightly smiled at Kazama's question.

"Elder Kudou didn't object to it."

Saeki hid her smile after answering this, then quickly changed the subject.

"There are clamors from JSDF GHQ for our brigade to help out with this year's competitions."

"Not orders, but clamors."

What Kazama said was agreement, rather than confirmation.

"Yes, we should consider that they brought these to me myself, or rather to our brigade."

"I can sympathize with that."

Even the GHQ knows that Saeki is critical of the Ten Master Clans and the status quo of the national magic community it controlled. To bring to a brigade-level officer like her a request to help out the Nine School Competitions was perhaps a form of harassment. Harassment towards Saeki and the competition sponsors the Japan Magic Association.

"For this the Magic Association has been playing hardball against the JSDF, but it looks like the GHQ is pissed."

"Finally."

On the surface, Saeki's words sounded like a complaint. But it's plain to Kazama that even the GHQ has finally started to feel the risks of requesting the Ten Master Clans.

On this correct answer, Saeki showed a satisfied expression towards him.

"I'm going to answer these calls."

Kazama braced himself for an incoming marching order.

"However, I'm not dispatching the Independent Magic Battalion. Your unit will be on standby for the duration of the Nine School Competitions."

Saeki's marching orders were not to sortie but to stand by.

"Understood. The battalion will stand by until further orders."

Totally caught off guard, Kazama's response was noticeably slower. Even so, he repeated the orders in a way military regulations allow.

"One thing."

Motioning Kazama, who's about to stand up and salute, to sit down again, Saeki again changed the topic.

"Not only did Elder Kudou not oppose the event changes, he seemed extremely positive about it."

Forget it, the talk went back to Kudou Retsu's reaction to the Nine School Competition event changes.

"I heard Elder Kudou has shown strong interest in the new event, the Steeplechase Cross-country. He ordered that the rules be changed so all can join instead of assigning players. Even the course has been lengthened and expanded according to his wishes."

"That's a surprise."

The Steeplechase Cross-country is a training so tough even regular combat magicians would be throwing in the towel. With the course long and expansive, staying on course is a tough proposition and the risk of magicians losing their powers is very high. Kazama knew that the old man really doesn't want to see young magicians turned into military sacrifices. And this made hearing the real story from Saeki all the more unexpected.

"This time it's seen as a betrayal of Kudou, who's always been campaigning to stop the treatment of magicians as weapons. But considering him, it shouldn't be a simple matter."

"You mean there's something behind it?"

"There should be, right, Major?"

He had asked on impulse, but with some thinking it was self-evident. When considering the reasons why Kudou is campaigning to stop the treatment of magicians as mere military sacrifices and weapons, it was unlikely that old man would change his dogma that easily.

"And one more thing, although this might not be good news for you."

Kazama, deep in his own thoughts, pulled himself at once back to Saeki's talk because of the ominous introduction.

"The Fujibayashi are in line with the Kudou and it looked like they're planning something in the Steeplechase."

"So that's the reason for the standby."

The Fujibayashi family is where Kazama's aide Fujibayashi Kyouko belongs to. He didn't think she's not to be trusted but the fact that she's one of their kin is enough for Saeki to pull Kazama from this case.

"That's right."

And Saeki didn't hide the fact that his conjecture is spot on.

"Needless to say, I'll have Major's unit moving when the situation calls for it. Please prepare for sortie and keep tabs on Lieutenant Fujibayashi's movements."

Not only did she not hide it, Saeki ordered Kazama to keep watch on Fujibayashi.

"Yes sir!"

Kazama was in no mood to complain. Trusting people and preparing for the unexpected are at least different things for them.

As he left the commander's office, Kazama's thoughts were not on his own aide officer, but on his one-time subordinate and NCO, Special Officer Ooguro Ryuuya -- in other words, Tatsuya.

Was it all right for him not to relay these to him, who might be joining the Nine School Competitions that was turning to an experiment ground? Saeki didn't touch on dispatching [Special Officer Ooguro], so perhaps he shouldn't divulge it yet. And until they've been ordered to sortie, he's simply a civilian.

However, there was little doubt that his younger sister would join the event in question. If danger would head for the sister who's blindly affectionate for him, even if it ended up as an attempt ....

Considering that it would lead to certain tragedy, no, catastrophe, turning a blind eye to it is extremely insane. Kazama can't help but think of that way.

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Chaos reigned over First High with the apprehension over the changes to the events of the Nine Schools Competition. When the competition's official website had made the details publicly available, there was a large scale outbreak of huge mood swings from hope to despair in the clubs related to the events.

However, the one who suffered the most was of course the student council.

First, they had to explain everything to the presidents of the clubs with athletes that were supposed to compete in events like Speed Shooting, which had been expunged, were attached to. Athlete selection was still at a tentative stage with the athletes themselves not even informed yet, but if the athletes were to take part in the Nine Schools Competition then they had to put that above their club practice. So they needed to inform the presidents of the clubs the prospective athletes were attached to in advance. And also starting work for the Nine Schools Competition earlier than previous years was, in light of the changes, rash. Azusa got into the mindset that 'the worst is yet to come'.

They started the athlete selection from scratch. They could not just keep the original representatives for the events that hadn't been swapped without giving it some thought. There were cases where the athletes were better suited to the newly added event than the event they were originally chosen for, and they had to take into account the new rule that Steeplechase was the only second event that the athletes could enter. The student council bore the responsibility for choosing the representatives but they could not ignore the opinions of the affected clubs. After all, they had to negotiate with each club concerning club activities practice and other things.

Also, they had to arrange for the tools needed for the new events. It was a simple business, but they had to start reading the tournament rules for each new event to determine what kind of equipment was needed for Row and Gunner, Shield Down and Cross-country Steeplechase, as well as what is permitted and what is forbidden. Today, when they left the school gate, all members of student council were wearing exhausted faces. Neither Miyuki nor Tatsuya were exempt from this feeling of exhaustion.

No matter how young they were, it wasn't easy to bounce back from this kind of exhaustion. They returned home and when dinner ended, Miyuki stood in the kitchen; the listlessness that lingered from the time she left school was clear when viewed from behind. However, despite that, Miyuki at this time in this place wasn't going to give this duty to Minami. If Miyuki's feeling could be told from this situation, then offering a moment to unwind for Tatsuya was, for Miyuki, a god given privilege and holy duty. Neglecting to do it because she was somewhat tired was not acceptable. She was more conscientious than usual as she made the coffee with her own hands; her tiredness did not diminish her smile one iota as she placed the cup in front of Tatsuya.

"Thank you, Miyuki."

Tatsuya firmly met his sister's eyes; he smiled at her, his thanks in his eyes.

"It was, umm...you're welcome."

Miyuki was accustomed enough to the nonchalant show of consideration from Tatsuya for it to not be enough on its own to make Miyuki blush. No matter how cold hearted he seemed to be normally, no matter how dispassionately merciless he seemed in the face of an enemy, Miyuki understood her elder brother was a 'kindhearted' person. Even so, when she was unexpectedly faced with his kindness, she responded with a faint blushing below her eyes---her excitement couldn't help spilling out.

"You're tired today, right. Stay."

Tatsuya, who was as usual sitting on the sofa that was not built for one person but rather three, tapped the spot next to him.

"---Ye-es!"

Instantly, the wide-eyed Miyuki happily sat down next to her brother. Minami, who was standing in front of the pair having her duty of waiting on them taken from her, could not conceal her dismay, but perhaps Miyuki had forgotten her, or maybe she wasn't letting it bother her; instead she practically glued herself to Tatsuya.

However, even if Miyuki didn't mind, Minami wasn't able to let it go. She still wasn't really used to it and she was far from attaining zen-like acceptance. Having lost the satisfaction of being a maid, she was unable to fight her desire to turn away when the e-mail arrival beep rang.

With joy, Minami turned to the console. Instead of putting it on the the main display that took up most of the wall in the living room, she peered at the small monitor attached to the console.

When she turned around, Minami's face was filled with confusion.

"Tatsuya-sama."

She was genuinely bewildered; she had forgotten to add 'onii-sama' as promised.

"An e-mail has arrived. There's...no sender."

There was a proper reason for her confusion.

"None?"

Tatsuya's voice as he asked was full of doubt. Regardless of pre-war days, the current e-mail system's format was strictly regulated. A high degree of technical skill might be able to disguise the original sender

but, under the rules, it was impossible for the sender's address to be a blank space.

However the reverse could be said: if you had the technical skill to send data that didn't fulfill the regulations over the network then disguising where it was transmitted from was easy. This unknown sender showed a high degree of technical skill and didn't want to tell them who they were...the mail could be interpreted that way.

If that were so, there were limited possibilities. There was someone he knew that could freely use the network like this...

(No, it would be premature to guess.)

Tatsuya dismissed his first guess to the person's identity that appeared in his head. An email sent from her---the possibility that it could be an email sent by her at another's request was not zero. Tatsuya thought the possibility was higher than 50 percent. But that still left an under 50 percent chance that it was malware sent by an adversary.

(The first thing to do is to check the contents.)

Tatsuya had set the wireless console in his home to not open emails containing possible malware; instead, the raw data transmission was displayed. His command had been overridden and lines of text were shown. The characteristic syntax gave Tatsuya a notion of who it was.

Tatsuya started his decoder; it read the displayed lines of text. The code was the type that was commonly used in the defense force. The 101st brigade used a different style of code, but he could not be sure this wasn't transmitted from the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

Currently, it was only when special hardware received meaningful signals that the communications technology was implemented (actually, this was in order to intercept; Echelon III was more advanced than the Echelon II version). This commonly used code might have been used on the mail data because security was the top priority.

Anyway, he couldn't determine whether it was from friend or foe just from the style of code. If he didn't look at the contents, he couldn't begin. Tatsuya silently waited for the decoding to finish.

"This is a lie, right...?"

However, the data reconstituted from the email caused him to shelve the matter of the identity of the sender. The information was so terrible that Miyuki, who had given her brother some space in order to not interfere with him, murmured that without thinking.

"The performance test of a new weapon... It's a lot to swallow, but I can't just reject it without investigating it."

The suspicious email claimed that the Kudou clan had taken advantage of the changes in the Nine Schools Competition that the military had brought about to test a new weapon they had secretly developed, and the proving ground they were using was Steeplechase Cross-country.

"The military's involvement is probably true. However, the anonymity factor makes it suspicious and since it is an established tactic to mix easily verifiable truth in with lies..."

Miyuki once again approached Tatsuya, who was deep in thought. This time it was not to be spoiled by her brother; it was because she was worried about him.

"Onii-sama...what do you think?"

Miyuki was vexed with herself for only getting a single concerned statement out. She was angry that she couldn't do more but at least she could be someone he could talk things out with instead of bearing it all alone.

However, this was only a needless anxiety on Miyuki's part.

"Hmm, tomorrow morning I'll try to consult Master."

Tatsuya answered extremely easily. Even if he did not pass the entire task off to Yakumo, it seemed like he fully intended to pass off a lot of the work on to him. Seeing that her brother was pretending to be a 'villain' as usual, Miyuki released the tension in her shoulders in relief.

"Onii-sama, do you need a refill of coffee?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Understood. Please wait a moment."

Since he was going to consult Yakumo, Miyuki was blanking it out of her mind until tomorrow morning, so she disappeared into the kitchen. For that reason, she failed to hear the rest of Tatsuya's words.

"Minami, pass this email on to Hayama-san for me."

"Yes, Tatsuya-sama."

"In the most heavily encrypted code."

"As you wish."

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In this world, there are people like Tatsuya who wish to 'avoid trouble as much as possible'; on the other hand, there are also people that positively wish to 'cause trouble'. Incidentally, across the ocean, eyes were looking intently and ears were listening carefully; there were also those who diligently searched for the seeds of chaos.

The Master of Zhou Gongjin was exactly that type of person.

[Gongjin]

The taxidermied human corpse used for the ghost spell called the name of the kneeling Zhou Gongjin.

[I understand that the Japanese Military is holding a performance test for a secret weapon at the Nine Schools Competition held in August]

The voice that was using the corpse to speak to the wall facing the Pacific Ocean belonged to one of the 'Seven Sages', Jeido Hague, one of the surviving Dahan military occultists, Gu Jii.

"A new weapon, sir?" While respectfully questioning him, Zhou was murmuring 'another?' in his own mind. By another he did not mean another new weapon: just last year they had gotten burned at the Nine Schools Competition and were making another attempt at tampering with it, was the type of thought passing through Zhou's mind. Hague's precious pawns, No Head Dragon, who had been maneuvering at the Nine Schools Competition last summer, had been rendered useless.

He thought the risks of meddling with the high school students' tournament were too high for too little gain; however, apparently his master believed otherwise, ruminated Zhou, somewhat surprised.

[They are calling it by the codename, Weapon P. I have not been able to confirm it, but from looking at the situation it is unmistakably something that uses the abilities of a parasite trapped inside an android]

Hearing this conjecture, Zhou was obediently impressed. Not with Hague's information network, but with the Japanese Military's technical skill. It was outside his specialty, but he had learned to use sprites in his own occult studies---this was not a fairy but an angry spirit with a demonic core---and he had heard enslaving and containing it in a doll was a difficult spell.

(They're reproducing the yellow turban[3] doll warriors; the Japanese are doing well……)

[Despite not being Mountain Sages[4], they think they are able to control the things, hmm. However, using high school students for the performance test is truly foolish]

However, Hague's opinion differed from Zhou's. Perhaps it was only that he did not want to acknowledge them.

"Is it all right to intervene in the test?"

[Prepare a berserker spell. It's Norman[5] witchcraft but the people under your control can use the format of their occult practices to make alterations]

"Understood. I'll make arrangements to insert a berserker spell into Weapon P."

Zhou was constructing how he would arrange for refugees from the Great Asian Alliance he would use in his mind and asked the most bothersome question.

"Is it alright to merely threaten?"

[It's not necessary to end it with them unhurt, but it's not necessary to kill. Weakening the Japanese Military by taking away their magical capacity is enough. Surviving as an incompetent would be worse than dying here]

This much suffering is okay was a Hague-like opinion. It was a pretty spiteful, naive thought.

"As you wish, Master Hague."

While Zhou was scoffing at his master in his head, he made a reverent prostration in form only.

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The following morning before going to school, Tatsuya visited Yakumo's domain accompanied by Miyuki.

Tatsuya was clad in his usual training wear.

In contrast, Miyuki wore summer sportswear: a half sleeve t-shirt, ultra violet ray repellant on her arms, a sun visor, shorts, and tights that provided partial UV protection that decidedly suited her. On the lower parts

of her legs she had in-line skates she could take off. On her hips, she wore a pouch filled with her CAD and other small items.

The pair looked prepared for morning practice. Actually yesterday evening, they had told him to suspend practice because they wanted to consult him on something. By the way, just as they passed the Main Temple, a pack of temple disciples came to attack Tatsuya.

From the look on the ambushed Tatsuya's face, he wasn't particularly disturbed by it. He probably expected something like this. In fact he had come dressed as usual because he had. However, he was undeniably under pressure. Today's consultation wasn't the kind that would come to a quick conclusion. As a result, Tatsuya spent the shortest time possible with Yakumo's students; in other words, he utterly demolished them without holding back.

Yakumo was sitting down on the priest's quarters' staircase and watching. Miyuki following behind him, Tatsuya walked to him.

"Good morning, Master."

"Good morning, Sensei."

Perhaps Miyuki was already aware of her brother's thoughts; without a complain about Yakumo's 'mischief', she bowed gracefully.

"Yo, morning."

On the other hand, the face of Yakumo who had pulled the 'prank' showed not a twinge of guilt. He might have thought of spurring on his pupils as nothing more than a kind of greeting.

Well, it's all water under the bridge now. When the time was right he would use this for a 'loan', but for now Tatsuya was stuffing this memory in a corner of his mind and quickly started to broach the main topic.

"Well, shall we talk inside-"

However, Yakumo interrupted him either intentionally or by sheer coincidence. Tatsuya looked slightly discouraged as he trailed after Yakumo, who had gotten up off the stairs he had been sitting on and proceeded inside the priests' quarters.

After Miyuki followed Tatsuya inside, the door automatically shut. Since there were no traces of psions being moved, it was probably opened and

closed by itself just as it seemed. Perhaps it was human powered; in short, a student might have closed it from the outside.

The windows were all shut, too. For a priest's quarters, it was rather airtight. As the room became pitch black, the candles on one wall were lit. A strong scent wafted out; the candles probably contained scented oil. Neither Tatsuya nor Miyuki were surprised by the candles being lit. It was clear to their eyes to the same degree that Yakumo had used magic to do it.

The light of three candlesticks wasn't enough to illuminate the whole room, but it provided enough faint light to be useful. To Tatsuya's eyes, the ignition point of the candles left the room a shade darker than it should be. Then he realized the candles weren't for illuminating the room but for filling it with the scent of incense.

He felt the psion light decrease.

"Is this a Kekkai[6]?"

According to what Tatsuya knew, psion information bodies---spirits, shikigami, etc.---are known to hate incense, but apparently not this particular scent.

"Since it's a private conversation."

Including the Yotsuba clan, Tatsuya believed there wasn't a magician or a spell that could get inside the grounds without Yakumo being aware of it. However, if the owner thought it necessary, then they should offer assistance since they were in a position to do so.

"Miyuki, please."

"As you wish."

Miyuki immediately surmised what her brother was thinking. She constructed a barrier that completely isolated the electrical and sound waves.

"Sorry."

Yakumo smiled as he responded, seeming pained. Apparently, it was his custom to use this Kekkai whenever he had a private conversation. Of course, considering the content of the conversation they were about to

start, there was no such thing as too many precautions. Tatsuya did not ask Miyuki to cancel the magic and broached the matter.

"Master, at this time we are bringing an extremely troublesome matter to you; please forgive us."

As Tatsuya lowered his head, Miyuki made a matching polite bow. They were thanking Yakumo in advance for his help. Speaking first was a preemptive strike to secure his cooperation before Yakumo even heard an outline of the matter.

"Kudou has certainly come up with quite a dangerous thing."

Therefore, as usual, instead of futile small talk, Yakumo abruptly went to the heart of the matter.

"It probably doesn't need to be said at this point, but even in ordinary circumstances, Steeplechase is a dangerous competition."

"As expected, Sensei thinks so too."

Miyuki's voice trembled slightly as she agreed with him. Like the rumbling of magma beneath the earth, the tone concealed fierce indignation.

The type of events held up to now, Mirage Bat, Monolith Code, Battle Board, etc.; all had the possibility of the loss of magical abilities due to accidents occurring. However, even in what could be called the best circumstances, the danger of Steeplechase Cross-country was so high that it can't be compared to Mirage Bat and Monolith Code.

"To use that dangerous event for the performance test of a new weapon is an idea I doubt the rationality of."

Weight was added to this statement by coming from Yakumo's mouth. Even someone who was in the view of ordinary people crazy enough to practice the ancient art of asceticism by embracing austerity in their day to day life regarded this idea as completely nuts.

"Are you aware of everything the Kudou clan has planned regarding this test?"

Tatsuya had made the phone call yesterday evening after eight pm. Which made him feel that even for Yakumo, he was a little too up-to-date regarding this matter.

"For example, the true nature of the new weapon."

"All I know is that they have codenamed it Weapon P. It's unfortunate but the details are unknown."

As expected, Yakumo half agreed with Tatsuya's doubts. His manner was extremely reluctant.

"....Even you don't know, Sensei?"

Miyuki asked in an incredulous tone. Suddenly, being told by Yakumo that there were things that Yakumo could not find out about, even if he investigated, was tough to believe. ---Until Tatsuya became his pupil, Yakumo had not determined the siblings' lineage, but she hadn't been aware of it when they were blind to their own shortcomings.

"I don't know yet."

Yakumo seemed unaware of his unintended irony. Perhaps his mind wasn't considering other people or his other acquaintances.

"Kazama-kun probably knows, but.."

"The Major is refusing to give information?"

"That is not the correct way to put it. He is under no obligation to share information with me."

There was no way to refute the point Yakumo made. Tatsuya was embarrassed by his own rash outburst. He was attached to the defense force as a special officer, but that was nothing more than a convenience. He was not yet an actual soldier and under the military's regulations, Kazama was at a higher rank than Tatsuya. A higher ranked officer had no reason to disclose everything to his junior.

Besides, Tatsuya was also a person of the Yotsuba. Even though his relatives did not acknowledge him as a member of the Yotsuba, looking objectively, Tatsuya was unmistakably a warrior of the Yotsuba. Kazama was essentially part of the brass of the 101st brigade which had the potential to be an antagonistic influence against the Ten Master Clans, so it would be natural for him to conceal things from someone who, as a subordinate of the Yotsuba, was under the command of the Ten Master Clans.

"Anyway, I don't know the details of the test Kudou is holding so I can't create effective countermeasures..."

Yakumo made a show of grumbling. However, his eyes emitted a challenging light. That light bragged that he would be able to quickly find out the true nature of Weapon P and the rest of it.

"So the first thing to do is to investigate."

Whatever Yakumo thought, since they essentially knew nothing, they didn't have any time to waste being undecided on how to proceed.

"You're right."

Tatsuya's comment was almost a question, so Yakumo gave his agreement.

"It's probably necessary to go to Nara."

"The former Lab 9."

"A place of hetu and prataya[7] for us."

Tatsuya knew about the antagonism against Lab 9 and those who bore the number '9' that ran among users of Ancient Magic. Perhaps that was the reason Yakumo was being unusually solicitous... Watching Yakumo's proactive attitude made Tatsuya consider being slightly contrary.

◊ ◊ ◊

July 5th: the noon break of the 3rd day after the notification from the Nine Schools Competition's management committee.

Tatsuya was looking at the data of the First High students in the student council room.

In this time of crisis for the school...contrary to expectations, there was another crisis brewing in the preparations being made under the cover of the Nine Schools Competition. On weekdays, the covert dealings had been handed off to Yakumo, so Tatsuya could commit his attention to this front.

The student council officers, including Tatsuya, plus the head of the Club Management Committee, Hattori, were looking at documents that summarized the results of the practical skills and other material for

selecting the athletes for the Nine Schools Competition. They had acted on the premise that the events wouldn't change this year, but they had to use all the data from the practical skills test to choose athletes for the new events.

While Tatsuya was biting into a sandwich, he was going over the data organized into a card format one by one. He was manipulating the keyboard one handed, probably making up a list of candidates.

By the way, the sandwich was one of the ones Pixie had made for everyone. Miyuki, Honoka and others would occasionally take a break from manipulating their consoles with their hands to eat in a more polite manner, but Azusa kept the sandwich in her mouth while she tapped the keys; advice was being silently received from Izumi.

"I think only changing the participating athletes in Ice Pillars Break, Mirage Bat, and Monolith Code who were taking part in two events would be all right, but what do you think?"

The first to speak up was Hattori.

"I think it would be fine, but the main division of Ice Pillars Break has to be divided into Solo and Pair."

"Shiba-san for the Girls' Solo, and wouldn't Chiyoda and Kitayama be good for Pair?"

After Tatsuya made his point, Hattori caught the ball and tossed out an idea.

"How about the Boys?"

"In the Boys Division, there's almost no difference between their abilities. Since the two would have to work together, the practical thing to do would be to decide based on compatibility, right?"

"I agree."

"I think it would be fine if we chose the Row and Gunner representatives from the Speed Shooting and Battle Board representative candidates."

"I think that's fine for Pair, but Solo requires a high level of skill with multicasting. Don't you agree that that must be taken into consideration?"

"I see. Which do you think is of greater importance, shooting skill or boat handling skill?"

"Since I expect the Row and Gunner boat to be more stable than the board for Battle Board, I think the ability to shoot while moving would be even more important."

"So then the corresponding clubs would be SS Board, the Biathlon club, the Hunting club, and also the..."

...The goal they were concentrating on this noon break was re-selecting the athletes; almost all the advancement on meeting that goal came from conversations like this between Tatsuya and Hattori.

After school, his feet took Tatsuya to the Second Smaller Gym. He wasn't playing hooky from desk work. This was also part of preparing for the Nine Schools Competition.

At the two entrances to the smaller gym, cleaner mats were installed that completely cleaned the soles of your shoes when you simply walked on them, therefore there was no problem even if you didn't take off your outside shoes when you went inside. However, Tatsuya dared to become bare foot because he was switching into his wooden floor mode; it was also known as entering the 'arena'.

Regardless of it being immediately before the last of the quarterly exams, the armor clad club members raised a rhythmic din from their clashing shinai. While he couldn't identify them by their concealed faces, Tatsuya searched for his target relying on body shape and posture.

"Erika."

"Uhh, Tatsuya-kun? It's odd for you to come to watch me."

Erika showed slight surprise at Tatsuya walking alongside the wall and raising his hand to greet her. As she had said, this was the first time Tatsuya had come to see the kendo club practice since his inauguration as vice president.

By the way, Erika was not a member of the kendo club. She was attached to the Tennis club. That being said, she was halfway to being something like a ghost member[8]. The tennis club wasn't a very active club; they no longer even bothered to complain when anyone missed practice.

Since that was how things were, Erika sometimes came to help the kendo club like this. ---She had not volunteered; it was at the request of Sayaka so she didn't try to get out of it.

Tatsuya was also aware of the situation. However, Tatsuya hadn't been aware that today was a day she was 'helping'. Tatsuya had gone on foot to the tennis courts before coming to the second gym. In short, he had wasted his time and energy, but since it wasn't Erika's fault, he didn't mention it to her.

"Why are you here?"

Erika wasn't aware that Tatsuya had been earnestly searching for her. So she was just making small talk.

"Ah. I am here to sincerely ask you for a favor."

Because Tatsuya assumed a formal posture and spoke those words in a formal tone, Erika lost all expression as well as all of her defense. It was what was commonly called the 'looking like an idiot' type of look, but she was so beautiful she even looked good like that.

"Err, what's up, this is sudden? You need a favor from me, Tatsuya-kun..."

The glint of alertness in Erika's eyes was not hidden; there was no mistaking the fact that she had picked up on part of his true identity.

"It's more a commission from the student council than a request from me."

However, this time Erika was overthinking.

"The student council?"

Understanding that, the tension left both of Erika's eyes; instead, strong doubt was reflected there. She was gripped by the natural question, 'What do they intend to make me do?'

Of course, there was no reason to conceal it from her, Tatsuya answered quite readily.

"It's regarding the Nine Schools Competition; we wish you to serve as a sparring partner in Shield Down practice."

"Ah, that interesting event. But are you sure I would be a good sparring partner?"

Erika acknowledged that her own magic skills were fairly limited. It was natural that she wasn't chosen to be a representative, so she had doubts on her own usefulness even as a sparring partner.

"Please, we really need you to do it."

However, Tatsuya had absolutely no doubts about Erika's suitability for the task. Without thinking, Erika averted her eyes from that direct gaze. ---It made her feel embarrassed.

"......If you are going to entreat me that much, I will make an attempt."

Although she boldly used a high-handed tone to conceal her embarrassment,

"You have my thanks."

Tatsuya's earnest demeanor did not falter to the bitter end. That felt deliberate;

'Maybe he's mocking me?' Erika accused him in her head. ... Although she knew quite well that it was nothing more than a false accusation.

Erika changed her clothes and went to the preparation area on the first floor of the small gym as Tatsuya had told her to.

"Why are you here?"

There, she unexpectedly saw the face of a certain classmate; the first thing she said was that. If they were alone or perhaps among friends, she probably would have thought nothing of it. However, most of the people seated in the room were upperclassmen that she didn't know; she just couldn't end it with a greeting.

(Aw nuts...I just acted without thinking as usual... What do I do now?)

Erika wasn't the only one looking; the upperclassmen appeared puzzled.

"Lay off. I was called by Tatsuya, too."

However, the bad atmosphere that had been spreading in the room was dispersed by Leo's answer. ---Was it that he didn't bother to read the atmosphere or was it simply that he couldn't read the atmosphere; it wasn't something that could be known without asking him.

"Erika, Leo."

Tatsuya's lightly chiding words were a clear indication that he read the atmosphere. The pair shut their mouths and Tatsuya introduced Erika to the Shield Down representatives.

"Well then, Shiba-kun, is it all right if I pair up with Saijou-kun to practice?"

"Is it fine if I partner up with Chiba-san when I practice?"

The first to ask was the boys' solo representative, Sawaki. The next utterance was the third year student named Chikura Tomoko who had been chosen to be the girls' solo representative.

"Okay."

Shield Down was a combat training type of game. However, there were only three representatives apiece for the male and female divisions: one person for solo and a two person team for pairs, so that they were short one person for two on two practice matches. Which led to Erika and Leo being chosen as sparring partners.

"We are having you serve as sparring partners for the solo practice matches as well."

Incidentally, they planned to add them to a rotation with the pairs representatives to give the solo representative a three person rotation to spar against.

"Uh huh. Shiba-kun had no other recommendations. Saijou-kun, I'm depending on you!"

"…….Thanks."

"Chiba-san, go easy on me."

"Ditto."

This was all the explanation they got; however, Erika seemed fine. Leo on the other hand seemed to be forcing his face into an insincere smile since his partner was Sawaki, who was rumoured to be a first class martial artist.

◊ ◊ ◊

Calling it the epicenter of the conspiracy would probably be a misrepresentation. If anyone traced the chronological order, the Kudou clan had only latched on to a military plot that was already using magicians for military objectives for their own purposes. However, using the pretext that the Nine Schools Competition, which was nothing more than a high school magic tournament, was already being used for military objectives, the Kudou clan had foisted a secret weapon test into what had already become dangerous conditions. This level of skullduggery was just something that had to be lived with, probably.

Besides, the Kudou clan hadn't really done anything they could feel guilty about. They knew quite well that they were not in a position where they could heap abuse on Kudou Retsu for suggesting the use of the Nine Schools Competition as the site of a performance test for a new weapon. On the contrary, the clan had every reason to energetically work toward ensuring that the Parasite Doll test didn't fail.

Today also, Retsu was at the former Lab 9 commanding his subordinates until the sun started down. If he didn't have this appointment, he probably wouldn't have left the lab until the middle of the night. His dinner meeting was with a politician who was a former soldier who had tremendous

influence on the Nine Schools Competition---when he retired he had been a captain below Retsu in rank---in order to win him over to his side, in response to an invitation.

After 6:00 pm. Retsu went to a traditional Osaka restaurant. It was around this time Makoto, whom Retsu had left in charge, received an internal phone call from the front gate guard concerning a visitor.

"A guest? I was not expecting one. Who is it?"

"As his name, he gave Zhou Gongjin of China street of Yokohama. He wishes to speak to you directly about his errand. Do you wish to see him, danna-sama?"

He had heard of the name of Zhou Gongjin of China street of Yokohama before. Even if the other 28 families had not heard of him, this was not a name someone who bore the family name of '9' due to originating from the former Lab 9 could ignore.

"I'll be there soon. Send him to the reception room, please."

Matching his words, Makoto immediately stood up.

As he entered the room, he saw a man dressed like one of Yokohama's Chinese businessmen get up off the sofa, and the first emotion that gripped Makoto was jealousy; Zhou Gongjin looked that young and dashing in Makoto's eyes. His refreshingly beautiful appearance had a sparkling vitality that an old man like Makoto could not possess. ---Or so Makoto thought.

"Welcome. I am Kudou Makoto, head of the Kudou clan."

Makoto clamped down on the dark emotions seething within and held out his hand with what looked to be a composed smile.

"I am Zhou Gongjin. Please call me Zhou."

In contrast, Zhou politely and, at least in appearance, humbly responded with a handshake.

"That name is notorious lately. You are quite the celebrity around here, Zhou-san."

The implications in Makoto's words made Zhou smile without any meaningless humility in response. It was within Zhou's calculations that he

would be recognized. In the first place, he came in his public persona because Makoto would know what he was doing around here and he could save himself some work that way, Zhou was thinking underneath the cover of his smile.

"I am honored that you know of me. As it happens, I asked to make this visit today because I thought I might be able to be of use to Kudou-sama in that matter."

"By that matter, you mean?"

"Yes, I believe that it is just as you are thinking, Kudou-sama. I wish to consult you on how to deal with my countrymen who are fleeing the tyrannical government of the Great Asian Alliance."

On one hand, Zhou cooperated with Japan in regard to maneuvering against the Great Asian Alliance; he provided various forms of support to those who wished the utter destruction of the Great Asian Alliance. His principal activities were lending his influence in order for political refugees to get through the last stages of acceptance, and sponsoring their journeys to Japan; however, he also helped financially with the refugees' political activities. As for whether the Great Asian Alliance knew of his activities as a refugee broker, they actually knew. The information wasn't so well known that all the high level government and military officials were aware of it, but at the very least it was an open secret amongst the military and government officials maneuvering against Japan.

As for why he wasn't on the Great Asian Alliance's political blacklist, it was because his guidance of political refugees was actually extremely convenient for the Great Asian Alliance's government. People who hoped to become political refugees were, in short, factions unsatisfied with the government. If they emigrated quickly, then the elements of unrest decreased. The Great Asian Alliance did not have a lack of manpower and because the refugees could not take all of their assets with them when they emigrated, it benefited the national treasury.

As for the spread of troubling political actions within the nation that they immigrated to becoming a minus diplomatically, that served as a pretext for economic embargo.

However, currently that wasn't a problem for the Great Asian Alliance. Due to the civil war with Dahan, the Great Asian Alliance had established control of the eastern part of the continent and at this point the military

junta grasped complete control firmly in their hands. Since the rebels were completely estranged from military strength, they couldn't take effective actions against the government, which was something they were well aware of. As for the threat of foreign interference, they would not be able to topple the government without a sufficiently armed group of insurgents. The Great Asian Alliance had not forgotten the violence of the foreign armies in the name of Dahan independence which, from the Great Asian Alliance's standpoint, was a mere pretext to foment rebellion.

Currently, the Great Asian Alliance had no difficulty with foreign relations. They were not politically isolated and they had the backing they needed in international relations because no nation was their equal as an independent military power, even though they were not economically independent yet.

However, in the current state of world affairs, the threat of the Great Asian Alliance was not inciting military cooperation. The four great military powers: USNA, New Soren, Indo-Persia, and the Great Asian Alliance itself were all setting military policy independently. The USNA and Indo-Persia had an alliance, but that was only a superficial relationship. There no longer were strong alliances like there were before the World War. If one of the great military powers tried to expand their territory, the other three would not remain silent, but there was no threat of interference in their internal affairs.

Because even economically the degree of self-sufficiency in the Great Asian Alliance was high, being blockaded economically didn't really hurt. However, they were uneasy about their energy supply, just like the other nations. Because many of the people who wished to immigrate were wealthy, as long as there were not too many, immigration was a bonus to the government's bottom line.

That was the reason for Zhou's activities as an immigration broker; of course, the Great Asian Alliance's government supported his activities from the shadows.

By the way, Japan currently exerted vigorous control over the acceptance of immigrants (political refugees). Japan was not the only one that did so; the framework of the conventions regarding refugees had become outrageously stringent with the repeated worldwide conflicts of the 20th century. However, it was only regulated and not prohibited. It was also a different matter for nations if the person was extremely talented, for

example, a capable scientist, a famous entertainer, or--- a powerful magician.

"Actually, next week I am expecting to receive 3 occultists from the continent, but there was a slight blunder...I haven't arranged a placement yet."

"A blunder?"

"It's an embarrassing story. It seems that they were refused based on the opposition of the initial immigration agents who examined them..."

"I see. Certainly, the various kinds of ancient magic can rub people the wrong way."

Makoto nonchalantly suggested that 'the immigration agents didn't like ancient magicians'. Of course, he was picking up the bait Zhou had dangled in front of him with his explanation; Makoto knew that and blatantly did it anyway.

"Therefore, as they say, it would be extremely inconvenient in various ways to have them be visitors in my house."

"In what way? Uh, no. It's all right not to say."

"No, these are not the kind of matters I would hesitate to disclose. The masters that have immigrated this time are all fairly powerful people… If I am not mistaken, the continental government will not take their departure quietly, mainly as a means of keeping face."

Makoto gave Zhou a piercing look. That was how he informed Zhou that he was interested in this matter. No, rather he was openly responding with interest in Zhou's business matters. By doing so, he was asking Zhou to get down to his main business.

"I cannot keep it hidden anymore, I guess. I have a favor I want to ask of you, Kudou-sama."

Zhou was aware of what that breath just then meant.

"So, would you welcome these Taoist masters as house guests?"

As Makoto wished, the conversation proceeded to the end with Zhou's head lowered in a plea. For an instant, Makoto let his lips loosen in satisfaction, but he immediately overwrote it with a doubtful expression.

"However, would that be wise? The various types of Traditionalists are allied with each other."

This was indeed the reason those who bore the number '9' couldn't ignore Zhou Gongjin. 'Traditionalist' was the name given to the various practitioners of Ancient Magic concentrated in Edo who overcame the differences of their sects to ally with the Magic Association. Even when they did not brandish the title of 'Traditionalist', the title was their pride, or perhaps their hubris.

The Traditionalists' goal was to defend the individuality of Ancient Magic from modern magic. It should probably be called, 'holding on to their identity' instead. It goes without saying that their mutual antagonism for Lab 9 was a major influence. The wrath of the Traditionalists over their betrayal by Lab 9 resulted in the grudge becoming a unifying force congealing the ancient magicians into an alliance; hostility toward those who currently bore the number "9" was a natural outcome, especially toward the foremost family among them, the Kudou Clan.

And it was customary for Zhou to introduce the ancient magicians among those he helped immigrate to temporary homes related to the various occult traditions that were already in existence in Japan. Zhou should have been aware of the potential to increase the hostility to his own people by associating with those who bore the number "9".

"It is my utmost duty to find a safe haven for my compatriots that are fleeing tyranny. I certainly have obligations to the Traditionalists who have cooperated with me up until now. However, that does not outweigh my original objective."

"You may call it a safe haven, but unless there are special circumstances, the government won't allow the naturalization of refugees."

"It doesn't matter if it is only temporary. For those who have been subject to tyranny, to live in peace is a priceless commodity even if it is only temporary."

Zhou was being truthful, but that made it look like he had investigated his countrymen. Of course, Makoto couldn't trust him completely, but it didn't matter to Makoto if it was a performance. At least, Makoto decided, he

could trust that Zhou wasn't teaming up with the Traditionalists to trick the Kudou Clan. It was enough for him to confirm that this wasn't some tactic by the Traditionalists.

"Understood. Ensuring that magicians can live like humans is the founding principle of our Ten Master Clans. It is the natural duty of the Ten Master Clans to extend our hands to magicians who have abandoned their native land because they want freedom. However, this isn't something we can do thoughtlessly, so please understand why I can't give you an answer immediately."

However, he could not immediately agree. He had to avoid having this person he just met for the first time view the Head of the Kudou Clan lightly, although he might have been over thinking things.

"Ah, that is only natural."

It seemed that Zhou did not mind that Makoto was delaying his decision, probably because he had received positive feedback to his plan from Makoto. Zhou took a small envelope from his pocket and handed it to Makoto.

"Here are the profiles of the master Taoists I have prepared. I hope I will receive a favorable reply."

"I will take the information you so thoughtfully provided. I should have a reply by the beginning of the following week."

Makoto replied to Zhou while taking the envelope with the data card.

"I am grateful. So it would be all right if I visit you on Monday?"

Makoto took a notebook style terminal from his pocket, and after casting his eyes down on it, immediately looked up.

"If it's at four pm."

"So at that time? Thank you for today."

Zhou made an elegant bow befitting his appearance.

As Makoto glanced through the data Zhou had handed him, he summoned the person in charge of lab security and ordered a gag order imposed concerning Zhou's visit.

"Don't even inform the previous head. Got it?"

Makoto commanded that it be kept so completely secret, that he even included Kudou Retsu. The chief of lab security looked troubled as he made his farewell and withdrew. Next, Makoto contacted the private information broker he used. From the information broker who came in less than an hour, Makoto requested a supplemental investigation to the one Zhou Gongjin had already offered.

Finished with the first document, Makoto leaned back in his chair and sighed deeply.

"Yellow Turban Doll Warriors, hmm?"

He had murmured that intermittently as he perused the data concerning the occultist's specialty in the dossiers. It was written there, that the three refugees were working on reviving the lost Taoist spell of the 'Yellow Turban Doll Warriors'.

"Way too convenient."

It was just like they had waited for the development of the Parasite Dolls to bring them in and sell them. Makoto understood Zhou's request. Regardless of how top secret the development of the Parasite Dolls was, Zhou had gotten a hold of the information, Makoto concluded.

"I ought to be concerned with how he got the information, but..."

However, when it came to the principles of puppets, spells to turn them into warriors, golem magic and the rest, ancient magic was one or two steps ahead of modern magic in spells that manipulated non-mechanical dolls from a distance. The spells the Parasite Dolls needed weren't those that used magic to manipulate puppets without a will of their own, but ones that controlled the devilishness inside the mechanical dolls; however, these deeply resembled the ancient magic spells that manipulated Spiritual Beings used as agents in dolls in many respects.

Taking all this into consideration, magicians who had researched the lost art of the 'Yellow Turban Doll Warriors' were just the type of people that he wanted to have working on developing the Parasite Dolls no matter what.

"What the heck? If they turn out to be snakes, I'll just chop off their heads."

It didn't matter if they were malicious types of snakes or informing type of snakes. With that last whisper in his mind, he stopped his inner monologue.

Chapter 3

By the end of the week, First High School was finally recovering from the shock given to them by the Nine Schools Competition's administration. They had already reselected the athletes to deal with the changes they had received notice of on July 2nd; on Saturday the 7th, practice for the events had commenced again. Quarterly exams started on Tuesday; however, they intended to have the new representatives get in at least one practice before then. Especially for the new events Row and Gunner and Shield Down, they decided that in order to get a grip on how to compete in the events, they should try holding mock bouts. They were unable to start on Steeplechase Cross-country; the overly massive scale of that field meant they hadn't yet finished preparations.

The Battle Board waterway was used 'as is' for the Row and Gunner practice; the targets were on loan from the Biathlon and Hunting clubs. As for Shield Down, they made one makeshift ring each in the sports field for both the girls and boys' practices, which had begun immediately after school.

Currently, in the girls' ring — which was really of the same standard dimensions as the boys' ring, at 20 meters in length and width, and 1 meter in height — the female solo representative, Chikura Tomoko, was facing off against Erika.

Aside from its size, the Shield Down ring looked like a boxing ring without the pillars and ropes; however, the floor surface had been made from materials that prevented slippage and tamped down vibrations to the least amount possible. Despite the canvas being barely suitable for running around on, Erika was freely rushing about.

"What the, so fast…!"

For some time now, Tomoko had been trying to push Erika out of the ring with 'Bias Release' magic. The normal way to use this magic is to compress the air on one side, then force a high pressured release of air on the opposite end.

However, she had been completely unable to keep track of Erika, who was using personal acceleration magic. Tomoko lost sight of Erika's form as she moved in a zigzag, and in the next instant, her shield received a fierce attack.

Erika made a practical application of landslide and smashed Tomoko's shield with her own. The technique could be called a shield bash version of landslide. The second they touched, the bash from Erika, who had maximized her own shield's inertia, sent Tomoko flying out of the ring with her shield.

Erika jumped down from the ring and reached out to offer her hand to Chikura Tomoko, who had landed on her back and was buried in the cushions laid out outside the ring. At Tatsuya's side, Hattori watched them and sighed. Realizing that Tatsuya had sent him a questioning sidelong glance, Hattori turned to face the boys' ring. There, Sawaki and Leo were crossing swords — or rather shields — with the representative pair, Kirihara and Tomitsuka.

The shields used in Shield Down were made of wood. The surface area of the boys' shields was over 0.5 square meters, while the surface area of the girls' shields was over 0.3 square meters. Aside from the handle, the rules prescribed that its form had to have no more than 2 curved surfaces. In short, as long as the surface of the shield's form wasn't wavy or something like that and both sides didn't fold back or something like that, it could be round, square or even star shaped.

As a result of the simulations of the athlete representatives' attack patterns, First High had adopted a spindle shaped shield. Kirihara was pointing the tapered end of the shield towards Leo.

In the middle of the ring, Leo dropped to his knees to catch and stop Kirihara's thrust. Without even a slight falter, Leo was truly remarkable, but Kirihara, who wasn't thrown off-balance in the slightest from the recoil of that total block, was just as amazing.

The two's movements ceased. Aiming for that moment, Tomitsuka set up an attack on Leo.

Tomitsuka dodged the glaring Sawaki, swiftly going around Kirihara on the right side. The trapped Kirihara was holding the shield one handed on his right arm; Tomitsuka's shield was longer and he gripped two handles with both hands. With his posture placing the shield in front of him on the right side, it looked like he was about to thrust a spear at Leo.

"Uwaa!?"

However, immediately beforehand, Tomitsuka's body was assaulted by a sudden gust of wind. As Tomitsuka went around to Kirihara's right, Sawaki went around to Leo's left. Sawaki, who had his shield attached to his left arm, was thrusting his right fist out at Tomitsuka.

Sawaki specialized in creating waves of air pressure with the speed of his fists. Magic widened the surface area without increasing the weight by coating his hand in a thick veil of air, and sent forth jabs of wind using magically accelerated fists. By the rules of Shield Down, hitting anything but the shield with a solid or liquid object attack was absolutely forbidden, but there were no guidelines on gaseous attacks.

Tomitsuka's slight body tumbled to the canvas. He barely avoided tumbling out of the ring; however, without the means for a distance attack, Tomitsuka was, in this instant, rendered an invalid. Kirihara was locked shield to shield with Leo, but his left hand could manipulate the CAD worn on his right arm.

There was only one move that could abolish the two to one formation. He had to compile magic to destroy Leo's shield, 'a sonic blade' using his shield as a medium. Kirihara applied a high frequency magic sequence and another magic sequence to prevent its own destruction to his shield.

The waves were transmitted to Leo's shield where the edges touched—

"Nuoh!?"

—Kirihara's shield was half destroyed. Unintentionally, Kirihara cried out in surprise, a reaction that was only natural. The reason the shield broke from the oscillation was that Kirihara's magic sequence, which was to prevent the shield from self-destructing, had lost out to Leo's fortification magic.

Leo smashed the edge of Kirihara's now upright shield. Leo's magically fortified shield shattered Kirihara's shield to pieces.

This result caused another sigh to escape Hattori's mouth. He shook his head two to three times and haltingly spoke to Tatsuya.

"Shiba… wouldn't it be better if we appointed Chiba and Saijou to the team?"

Actually, they had been put forth as representative candidates before, but Tatsuya had been the one to object to them the most.

"If there weren't restrictions on the attacks, those two would both be strong candidates, but-"

"They wouldn't win under the rules of Shield Down? You said that at selection time, but in actual bouts, this is…"

"Only because neither Chikura-senpai nor Kirihara-senpai are used to the methods of fighting in Shield Down. Minami."

After gently denying Hattori's misgivings, Tatsuya called out to Minami, who was watching the practice from close to the girls' ring.

"Yes, Tatsuya-niisama?"

Minami started to rush over to him; however, Tatsuya stopped her with a hand gesture and walked over to the girls' ring himself. The girl beside Minami, who was Minami's partner in the first year girls' Shield Down pairs competition, stiffened out of nervousness.

"Erika."

"What?"

Tatsuya beckoned Erika with a hand as he walked. Erika, who had been fervently watching Leo's bout, immediately returned to the girls' ring.

"Erika, take on Minami as an opponent for me, please."

"You mean solo?"

"Yes."

"Hnmm... Alright then."

After visually inspecting Minami from head to toe, Erika nodded an agreement and ascended to the ring.

"Minami."

While obviously shaken by this unexpected development, Erika continued her ascent as Minami was called to a stop and Tatsuya whispered something to Minami.

Watching this, Erika forced her lips to smirk.

"I'm sorry for keeping you waiting, Chiba-senpai. Please start whenever you are ready."

When Minami climbed into the ring, she called out pleasantries and

"I wonder what tactical advice he gave you. This is going to be fun."

Erika answered with a deadly smile.

"If both of you are ready."

As with the Nine Schools Competition custom where no referee is present in the arena itself, there would not be one on the canvas for Shield Down. Instead of the electronic beep, Tatsuya blew a whistle.

Erika attacked Minami head on. She wasn't refraining from using a feint because she took Minami lightly. She just couldn't keep her curiosity, over what the plan Minami had received from Tatsuya was, under control.

As she faced the savagely lunging Erika, Minami quickly and calmly manipulated her CAD.

Erika's body instantly halted. Because the inertia affecting her body was neutralized, so was the possibility of further movement according to Erika's own will.

Minami had created an all encompassing wall that Erika's shield had slammed into. There was no recoil because inertia had been reduced as much as possible. However, that was true for Minami as well. Not being jarred by the impact, Minami switched to her next cast.

Erika's body was slightly elevated. She was not floating of her own will. She was stranded on the slightly angled barrier Minami created. Even with inertia cancelled, gravity was still in effect so it was possible to straddle the barrier. However, there wasn't resistance for her feet to push off from and get loose.

"Wait a…"

Erika hurriedly tried to cut off the neutralization magic, but unfortunately with her skill she could not immediately end the magic. Inertia had been reduced, but uniform velocity still applied. As a result, Erika was moved out of the ring by the advancing Minami's barrier as if she had wings.

"It couldn't be, just now… was that Juumonji-senpai's 'Phalanx'!?"

Hattori whispered, his voice full of shock.

"No. The method used just now is successive movement of a single layered physical barrier."

Tatsuya quickly refuted that.

"The principle works just the same as simple movement magic. For movement magic, the process alters the coordinates of the target, one after another. In this case, the target for coordinate alteration is not a physical object, but rather the coordinates for the deployed barrier."

"Is it really that simple…?"

Hattori's shock didn't wear off; instead, it deepened slightly. If that could be easily done, then anyone could duplicate the attack aspects of 'Phalanx'.

"The difference between the degree of difficulty of the process Minami is using and Phalanx is extreme. After all, the attack type Phalanx is a magic that continually creates multiple barriers against physical objects in constant motion between set parameters and is unique in its sustainability. There is no need for Minami to build and sustain enough force to crush her target into her sequence."

After he answered the question, he left Hattori's side and walked over to where Chikura Tomoko was. There, Erika, who had fallen from the ring, and Minami, who had descended from the ring with an apologetic look on her face, gathered.

"Man~, I got done in bad. But, good grief, I didn't think I could be thrown out of the ring so quickly."

"If your thrusts are that obvious, it's inevitable that you'll be hit with a counterattack. Erika's forte is speed the eye can't follow; in short, her opponent has to use something that does not require visual confirmation."

"…Well reasoned."

Tatsuya turned his gaze from Erika, who looked daunted from having the weak point of her secret technique mercilessly pointed out to Tomoko.

"I believe you have just seen how to deal with adversaries who challenge you to close combat."

"…I can't use a barrier like that."

"Chikura-senpai, aren't vector inversion processes your specialty?"

Perhaps since she hadn't realized Tatsuya knew her magic specialty, Tomoko's eyes widened slightly.

"…Yes, that's true."

"Applying vector reversal on your opponent just before your shields touch would be a good way to send your opponent flying out of the ring with movement magic."

It was vexing that Tatsuya proposed a technique she hadn't known of or imagined. In this Nine Schools competition, Tatsuya held two positions, that of an engineer and a tactical advisor. It would be out of the question for him not to know the athletes' strengths and weaknesses for either role. It was a slightly blunt way of putting it, but perhaps there was a reason. —The potential for facing such a situation was high.

Aside from whatever she thought of his attitude, Tomoko generally understood Tatsuya's advice. The one who looked like she had something to say was Erika, but Tatsuya's attention was on the vibrating information terminal in his pocket.

He took the terminal out and read the message. Tatsuya then turned around and spoke to Hattori.

"It seems that the preparations for Pillars Break are done. I would like to switch over to there, so can I leave this to you?"

"Ah, good work. I'll take it from here."

Having anticipated those words, Hattori quickly agreed to it.

Just in case, Tatsuya took a look over at the boys' ring. At the side of the third year engineer entrusted with fine tuning Sawaki's CAD, Hirakawa Chiaki was listening to Tomitsuka with all her might. Perhaps she might be listening to his impressions of the CAD he would use in competition. Deciding there were no problems, Tatsuya made his bow to Hattori and Chikura and spoke to Erika and Minami, then went to the practice grounds of Pillars Break in the training forest.

Every year Pillars Break practice took place in an open air fifty meter pool deep inside the training forest. It wasn't a pool for swimming; it was for fluid

control practice. The normally waterless pool was capped and filled with water, where pillars of ice were created and then erected using magic. And finally, Pillars Break practice could begin. That was the usual procedure.

Up till last year, the business of preparation took a lot of time. This year, however, the preparations finished in one fourth the usual time.

"Ah, Onii-sama. The preparations have been made."

Since she was a freshman last year, Miyuki had tactfully refrained from volunteering, but this year she was deeply involved in the operation and had proceeded to show what she could do. Tatsuya was aware that last year she was only doing about half of what she was capable of, but Miyuki's ability was exceeding even Tatsuya's expectations. —Actually, it only took about as long as it took to prepare and fill the pool with water.

"Thank you for your hard work. That was really fast."

"I can't have Onii-sama waiting after all."

Miyuki's remarks were in keeping with her image as a Yamato Nadeshiko; however, the look she was giving Tatsuya was completely at odds with her words and image. Her eyes spoke eloquently. She wanted him to return to her as soon as possible. Her real motive was clear to anyone who looked at her; Kanon and the rest were openly disgusted.

"My, I didn't think she would swiftly mold twenty four pillars of water and freeze them in one fell swoop."

"Did Tatsuya-san arrange that fluid control magic?"

Kanon's grumbling was mixed with sarcasm; however, Shizuku was interested in the techniques Miyuki had used.

"The application of similar models duplication theory was my idea, but the practically usable form was Miyuki's."

"I just intuitively used the magic from the Activation Sequence Onii-sama had already constructed."

The brother and sister were praising each other's achievements. At this point, not just Kanon, but Shizuku as well turned away allowing the two to have their own way.

"…Anyway, since the preparations are done, let's get started."

At Tatsuya's words, Miyuki immediately got into position.

Kanon and Shizuku's moves were somewhat sluggish which was not completely their fault.

As already noted, the fifty meters long, twenty meters wide, and five meters deep pool was not for swimming. Therefore, it was not kept to a high hygienic standard. All that had been done was to coat the surface of the walls and bottom with highly water-repellent clay. However, that made it quite suitable for Pillars Break practice.

On the scaffolding on one side was Miyuki.

On the scaffolding on the other side were Kanon and Shizuku.

It was a two to one handicap match, but it could not be said that the pair had a clear cut advantage.

Except in special conditions, magic could not be mixed. If the combination of magic Kanon and Shizuku released did not go well, both their magics would just not activate. Or, rather if they screwed up, neither of the effects of their magic would appear. This was a problem in the other pair competitions as well, but it was expected to be especially problematic for Ice Pillars Break.

"Good luck, Shizuku!"

Honoka was cheering on Shizuku. Because construction on Mirage Bat was delayed, she had come to watch the Pillars Break practice, at least that was her excuse for being with Tatsuya.

"Miyuki-senpai, good luck!"

Izumi rooted for Miyuki competitively, but with slight embarrassment. She was the representative in the newcomers' Ice Pillars Break, so while she probably had some wicked thoughts, she was actually here to learn from observation.

"Well then, begin."

As Tatsuya's words continued, the conveniently installed light that was red switched to yellow. When it switched to green, magic exploded into the pool.

Kanon, who was sitting on a folding chair, was frowning with a faraway look in her eyes. Miyuki and Shizuku were standing, looking at each other as if they were bewildered about 'what to do about it'.

They had continued the mock combat for five rounds with Miyuki doing almost all the ice pillar replacement; in short, regardless of how much excess power she used, Miyuki had won all five rounds. Even someone other than Kanon would be sullen at this result.

"Chiyoda-senpai on attack; Shizuku on defense. I don't think this strategy is fundamentally unsound."

And making no attempt to soothe Kanon's sullenness, Tatsuya spoke to her with no hesitation.

"Are you saying we didn't fail due to the magic? So what are we doing wrong?"

"It's not that you are doing anything wrong; you've had too little practice in coordinating with each other. Since today is the first day, it's only natural."

"…In what way was it bad."

"In the area where your magic was active, Senpai and Shizuku's Fortification area overlapped a little."

Hearing Tatsuya's explanation, Shizuku bowed her head in front of Kanon.

"I'm sorry, Senpai. It was my mistake."

"That's right. In order to oppose the area Miyuki's magic affected, you probably widened the target of your fortification to encompass our whole area, but as expected, Fortification magic is meant to be used not on areas, but individual Information Bodies. Besides, in Pillars Break, as long as at least one pillar remains, you haven't lost, so you should have considered narrowing the number of your targets."

"Yes, understood."

"Onii-sama, do you have any advice for me?"

With a 'smile', Miyuki interposed herself in front of Shizuku, whose face as she gazed up at Tatsuya looked like a puppy waiting to be petted.

"When you lose, Miyuki, I'll give you advice. And if it's because you weren't trying, I'll scold you."

"Scold… I wouldn't deliberately lose. It would be an insult to Senpai and Shizuku."

Miyuki replied to Tatsuya's words in an angry tone, but she was a little red around her averted eyes.

Kanon watched with a flabbergasted look. She was actually unhappy that the engineer in charge of practice was Tatsuya, not Isori. So she wanted to find fault with Tatsuya's work; however, seeing the attachment Miyuki and Shizuku had for Tatsuya with her own eyes, in her heart, Kanon smiled wryly and said 'I guess I'll put up with it until the actual match' to herself.

◊ ◊ ◊

July seventh, Saturday night. With the length of the days in this season, the time could still be called early evening; despite that, the Saegusa Clan's main house had fallen silent.

The eldest son of the master, Koichi, had already married and currently resided in a condo in the city's heart with his wife. The second son was always staying overnight at the former Lab Seven or one of the other magic research facilities established by the Saegusa Family, thus that had practically become his home. The eldest two were the children of Koichi's deceased first wife and were in the habit of avoiding their younger sisters, the children of the second wife. By no means were they on bad terms, but there was probably some antipathy for them somewhere in their hearts.

As for Koichi's daughters, Mayumi, the eldest, was again at a party today and hadn't returned. This evening's ball wasn't part of the Numbers' social scene, but a Star Festival party sponsored by the university; however, she probably would return sometime close to midnight as usual.

Kasumi and Izumi had bathed earlier and retired to their own rooms. Because the pair had quickly spat out 'we're exhausted, today', they might already be asleep.

Although like his youngest daughters, Koichi was exhausted, he could not rest. In the study, the underling who the working Koichi was waiting for asked permission to visit.

"Enter."

A knock provoked authorization to enter the room. The knocker was Nakura, his trusted retainer for the present.

"What did Zhou Gongjin have to say?"

In his prologue, Nakura constrained himself to brevity when giving the requested information. Of course, Nakura was not merely economizing on the effort of speaking; he was offering an emotionless reply.

"A refugee from the Great Asian Alliance has received a commission from the present head of the Kudou Clan."

"Hmm…what's the real reason he contacted Kudou?"

"To interfere with the performance test of the parasite possessed combat gyroids 'Parasite Dolls' in the Nine Schools Competition, by driving them amuck and injuring the participants. He says he will not go as far as killing them. Do you think it's alright to trust him on this point?"

"The method?"

"By using a technique that will drive the parasite being used insane."

"……External Systematic Magic that intervenes by spirits, huh."

Koichi murmured, seeming deeply interested. However, he apparently immediately lost interest and turned his body to the desk.

"Good work."

The words were filled with a command to leave. However, Nakura did not meekly obey it.

"Is it alright to leave it alone?"

"Not my concern."

Koichi answered with his back toward Nakura.

"The Parasite Doll performance test is being held during the Steeplechase Cross-country event. First years are not a target."

"Do you mean it's not your concern because your own relatives will not be injured?"

"That's an odd thing to say."

There was no tinge of criticism in Nakura's voice, but Koichi felt that there was something there he had to respond to and turned his chair to face Nakura.

"Why should I expend my efforts for the sake of other clans' daughters?"

Nakura bowed his head, acknowledging his error and Koichi's point. In the first place, considering his connections to the events connected to this, it would be hypocritical of him to be concerned about other families.

"Besides, the first ones to interfere in this event were the Military's extremists. The Parasite Dolls' test is something that came about when Master Kudou used it for his own ends and substituted the magicians for machines. By now, one or two more stratagems have probably been piled on."

Due to the ringleader being part of a group he was close to, Koichi was very familiar with the particulars that led to the extreme changes in the rules and events of the Nine Schools Competition.

At the start, the military's anti-Great Asian Alliance extremists laid the foundation. They vehemently opposed the peace treaty made with the Great Asian Alliance in November of last year.

They advocated that we must take advantage of the opportunity given by the loss of a third of the Great Asian Alliance's total fleet and attack to rid ourselves of the longstanding threat. In short, they wanted to start a war. Before the Yokohama incident, this was a minority opinion within the Military, but since Yokohama, there had been a steady increase of supporters.

However, the military threat had been effectively grounded. A fact which increased the opposition to the extremists, which had grown to have too much influence for the military's top brass to ignore.

Approval for putting pressure on the Magic Association was largely influenced as to pacify the extremists. As a result, competitive events with a strong military flavor were scheduled in this year's Nine Schools Competition.

What would happen afterwards, Koichi could only conjecture, but Kudou Retsu hadn't blocked the flow of events since then, only twisted it. Retsu had, under the pretext of testing a magic weapon, attracted the interest of the extremists, to show them a scene where magicians were beaten by Parasite Dolls; that rather than making weapons out of magicians, he would make them think advancing development of the Parasite Dolls initially created as a weapon would provide greater military gains.

There was no proof. It was nothing more than conjecture inferred from the situation. However, no matter how much Koichi considered it, it was rather fitting that Kudou Retsu would prefer this over the development of magicians as weapons.

"Nakura, there is no reason to brood over this. Even if Makoto-dono falls into the trap, sensei will make things work."

His attitude showed how Koichi trusted his former teacher.

◊ ◊ ◊

July eighth, Sunday. Tatsuya had visited FLT's 3rd Division research facility in spite of it being a day off, would be a suitable expression to use in this case. Or perhaps it was more adequate to say he had done so because he was off from school.

The only unusual point was that Tatsuya was alone. Because quarterly exams were from Tuesday on, Miyuki was studying at home. Wearing herself out by practicing her skills would be meaningless, but reviewing her notes would be effective.

As usual, the lab was brimming with researchers not knowing any difference between the weekdays and holidays. They were all busy working. The 3rd Division was currently approaching the final stage of developing a new product.

A completely thought-controlled CAD. The completed device would bring about a technological breakthrough by providing Device-Assisted Magical Invocations. Half a year earlier, Rozen Magicraft had put together the world's first completely thought-controlled model, but FLT's new product would succeed that.

Naturally, Rozen and FLT's products were based on completely different concepts. Rozen's CAD incorporated an exclusive mechanism utilizing a Psion wave-activated switch, which, as a device, would enter a fairly large size.

In contrast, the completely thought-controlled CAD FLT developed was one solely specialized to produce the Activation Sequence for Non-Systematic Magic operating the CAD. Where traditional CAD focused on producing given Activation Sequences for designated magic through finger input, this device realized that through Non-Systematic Magic input.

Though FLT's completely thought-controlled model mandated installation of a pairing software that coupled to the CAD, they thought there were huge advantages to being able to continue using a device you were accustomed to working with. At least, that was how the 3rd Developmental Division read the situation. The pairing software covered eighty percent of the CADs that had been put on the market in the last five years, regardless of whether they were general purpose or specialized models. Because it could be manipulated by Psion waves alone, this new product was expected to triumph over the issue of brand designs and generate large demand as a supplementary product.

Today was the day it underwent the final test to become a finished product; if no problems were discovered, then they would begin arrangements to launch the commercial model. By the time Tatsuya showed his face in the monitor room, the test had already started.

"Good morning. Am I a little late?"

"Good morning, young master! No, you are right on time. We couldn't bear to wait until your arrival, so we started early."

Ushiyama lowered his head with an apologetic look on his face, but his eyes were happily smiling.

He wasn't sneering at Tatsuya as he smiled; the smile was that of a craftsman when he built a piece he was proud of.

"Is that so. Then I don't particularly mind, but…"

His eyes went to the monitor on the surface of the wall and Tatsuya made a smile similar to Ushiyama's.

"It looks like it's going well."

The large monitor was displaying the ongoing results of the twenty-two testers simultaneously going through the test. They were going through the eight major types of magic in the four great systems one by one and swapping the CADs each time.

"Up til now, everything has gone well! The time loss is also below our assumed estimates."

The testers were only using rudimentary magic. This was a commonplace scene when testing a new model of CAD. However, there were two points where it differed from the familiar. The first was that the CAD switches were not being touched by the hands. And the other one was that a small, medal shaped device was dangling on a thin chain from the necks of the testers.

This 3 cm diameter, 6 mm thick object with an artificial silver finish was a round disk. This was the completely thought controlled CAD. Reflected on the monitor providing a visualization of Psion light activity was the status of their medal-shaped CADs as they took in Psions and generated an Activation Sequence. Tatsuya watched one of the testers being displayed on the monitor through his power to observe both the Information Body and the Activation Sequence produced from the medallion on the chest as the tester's Psions changed to manipulate the Magic Sequence, watching as the Psion waves converged into a narrow point, pinpointed the switch buttons on the bracelet worn on the left arm, and were absorbed.

While CAD buttons had electric switches, it similarly had an inductive stone antenna installed to receive Psion signals. This antenna, which was an already installed type of switch that did not need manipulation, directly interacted with Psions instead of being manipulated by fingers; however, users who were unfamiliar with Psion manipulation unfortunately often activated the wrong Activation Sequence, and the probability that the CAD would itself recognize the mistake was small. This completely thought controlled CAD had been developed to allow even Magicians not well versed in Psion manipulation to accurately designate the Activation Sequence, and also get rid of the former CAD misrecognitions.

For that purpose, the plan Tatsuya and his team had adopted was one where through the Psion waves converging into the inductive stone antenna, they would send in Non-Systematic Magic. To generate the Activation Sequence needed to invoke magic using magic. Certainly, that was a circuitous way, but only because it was best to use a simple structure to operate the CAD, so the burden on the magician would almost

always be low enough to ignore. On consideration of the matter, compared to the merit of correctly indicating the Activation Sequence, the indirectness of the method was trivial.

"I want to test it as well."

"Please do. Hey, give the young master a test model!"

Tatsuya took the medal shaped, completely thought-controlled CAD from the researcher who came running in answer to Ushiyama's call and went to the test room.

◊ ◊ ◊

The afternoon of that same day, Tatsuya took Miyuki downtown. Or to put it more correctly, Miyuki took him.

The test of the new model CAD proceeded without problems and finished before noon. Tatsuya had already returned the special model cartridges to the storage of the CAD he normally used from the one he used in the movement verification test he had overseen and he couldn't find any flaws.

For that reason, the time he had reserved for fixing bugs became completely vacant.

Removing the character for 'prototype', Tatsuya returned home with the completely finished version of the completely thought-controlled CAD as a souvenir to face the sullen glare of his younger sister, who was starting to feel stressed. Of course, Miyuki didn't snipe at Tatsuya or anything — it was rare for her to do so — she just directed surly, angry eyes at him.

However, Tatsuya could not set that aside. Since they had started high school, Miyuki had always maintained second place in the written tests (in the combined scores, it goes without saying that Miyuki was the undisputed top). By no means did Miyuki not comprehend the subject matters she was studying; having said that, she was not the type to obsess over placement. It only took one glance for him to decide that the amount of stress Miyuki was under wasn't merely from studying.

(Have the preparations for the Nine Schools Competition become burdensome…)

Thinking that, Tatsuya suggested Miyuki go out to change her mood.

"An excursion with Onii-sama? Let's go! Please let's go!"

While Miyuki replied like that, Tatsuya was caught off guard by her fierce attitude. In short, Miyuki wanted Tatsuya to come with her. He felt her response was a little too extreme, his little sister just wanted to be spoiled by her elder brother. Tatsuya hesitated because he was aware of that, but he didn't dislike spoiling Miyuki.

"How about you, Minami?"

Tatsuya's question was partly due to the importance of taking their housemate into consideration.

"No, I have to study for the tests and I want to do a little cleaning."

So you don't need to include me, was the sum of Minami's politely worded answer. Her conscience said 'Shouldn't she fulfill her duty as a Guardian and accompany them', but in the end, her feelings of 'There's no way I want to be stuck in that sickening sweet atmosphere' won.

Tatsuya had suggested the outing, but he hadn't thought up an actual plan when he did it. So deciding where to go was left up to Miyuki, and as a result, they went shopping in downtown Shibuya.

A weakness for fine clothes was an aspect of Miyuki. She still had only a slight interest in cosmetics, but she liked looking at and wearing clothes, thought Tatsuya. Miyuki's real feelings were slightly different; she liked having Tatsuya look at her all dressed up. Well anyway, it was a frequent pattern that when he went out with Miyuki they would tour those types of shops. So today as well, the pair was visiting a recently built Fashion Center.

In this center, each tenant did not run a separate business, but rather each floor's shop owners seemed to collaboratively do business; there were no partitions between fellow tenants. The party dress display was next to the area that sold lingerie, the layout making any male casually walking around feel uncomfortable.

Tatsuya also drew attention when he first got there, but since he was basically only following Miyuki, he didn't avoid their attitudes. Since he didn't feel particularly embarrassed, Tatsuya decided that feeling awkward about crossing the lingerie area and the swimsuit area on the sides was strange.

Today, that would backfire on him.

Miyuki had chosen a well ventilated dress for summer use in the area that sold casual wear and presented it to the clerk hoping to try it on; unfortunately, none of the changing rooms for that area were open. Both Miyuki and Tatsuya were fine with just waiting for the previous customers to finish up; however, perhaps a strange inclination awoke in the store clerk who was moved by Miyuki's beauty, and the clerk forcibly guided Miyuki to an open changing room on the same floor.

Which was a changing room in the area that sold swimsuits.

As usual, Tatsuya crossed the narrow area displaying women's swimsuits; however, perhaps even he felt it would be wrong to stand outside the changing room. As Miyuki disappeared into a door in the wall across from him, he told her to call him on his information terminal if she needed him and Tatsuya left the area.

However, his consideration was not rewarded. Of the four changing rooms lined up and completely concealed in the store, this was the one furthest in, and as Tatsuya took the corridor to get out to the main floor, he passed in front of the other three changing rooms, where in front of the one closest to the door, he bumped into two young girls. The girls were kouhai that Tatsuya knew well.

"Shiba-senpai!? Why are you here! This is the women's locker room!"

The one with the upset voice that pressed him for answers was Saegusa Kasumi, who was a boyish figure in her T-shirt with an animal design and jeans with the cuffs turned up.

"It's not a locker room, it's a changing room, Kasumi-chan…… Ah, could it be! You're with Miyuki-senpai!? Where is she!?"

After she corrected the shocked words of her elder twin, Saegusa Izumi suddenly excitedly approached Tatsuya, clad in her quite feminine but somewhat sheer sleeveless dress that used a lot of lace and had a wide neckline with a hem that was five inches above her knees.

And if the pair was here then he could make a rough but accurate guesstimate about who was in the changing room. Gripped by a sense of impending doom, Tatsuya tried to leave the area. —Unfortunately, he was a little late.

"What are you two making a fuss about…….Oh."

The high but not quite complete airtightness of the changing room was to blame. Even though Mayumi could hear the noisiness of her younger sisters, she couldn't catch what they were saying and thus opened the door to scold them.

He knew his back was being glared at. If he made a run for it here, everyone would conclude he was a peeping tom. Rather than resigning himself to being accused of a crime he had no memory of committing, Tatsuya reluctantly faced the momentary awkwardness. Tatsuya had rapidly calculated that in his head and forced himself to calmly turn around.

After all, there was no way she was coming out naked, the worst case scenario was that Mayumi would be wearing underwear.

The cloth that Mayumi, who was standing stock still wide-eyed in front of Tatsuya, was wearing only covered a little bit of her body, the area around her breasts above and her hips, bottom and crotch area below — it was a white bikini.

Her chest had an abundance that did not match her small body and there was a clearly defined cleavage between those two mounds.

Her hips were lush to an unexpected degree and with her narrow waist formed mesmerizing curves.

Her exposed thighs looked smooth as marble but somehow gave off an impression of softness.

"Wha…….Tats…..he….."

"Please calm down, Saegusa-senpai."

He thrust both palms out at Mayumi who was beginning to tremble out of fear and repeatedly made small soothing gestures. In short, his body language matched the words he spoke. Surprisingly, Tatsuya's appeals (?) bore fruit. Mayumi gradually backed away from Tatsuya, returned to the inside of the changing room and, with a slight click, shut the door.

"Kyaaaaaaa!"

What he could hear from inside the changing room was unmistakably Mayumi's scream. Once again, Tatsuya plotted his escape.

"I thought there had been some kind of incident……"

"I made a fuss…."

All it took was Miyuki's honest impression to make Mayumi convey an apology with her body hunched down.

"No, it is not your fault, senpai. Rather, it is I who should apologize."

They were in a coffee shop doing business in the fashion center. Tatsuya, Miyuki, Mayumi, Kasumi and Izumi surrounded the table.

"It's because I had Onii-sama accompany me to a place like that……Senpai, Onii-sama, I am so sorry."

Miyuki had invited the other four to this shop. She had asked Mayumi because she wished to properly discuss the previous turmoil; Kasumi and Izumi on the other hand had been summoned as witnesses by Tatsuya.

"No, it's not your fault, Miyuki-san. It's not…..it wasn't like I was seen naked. Be- being embarrassed about the swimsuit is a little strange. I am sorry, Tatsuya-kun. I screamed a little while ago, just out of surprise."

Because she was older or perhaps because she was aware that she was older, Mayumi determinedly conducted herself like an adult. However, at the same time, it was clearly evident to everyone but herself that her remarks were actually aimed to herself. If you looked at her stained red cheeks and the way her fickle gaze whirled all over the place, you would completely understand that even now she was still distressed.

Tatsuya didn't say anything. If he denied Miyuki's words, he would unfortunately look like he was covering for her and all apologizing to Mayumi would do was stir up her mortification.

"No, I think it is understandable."

It took all his strength for Tatsuya to make that answer.

However, that left one of the girls there dissatisfied. Kasumi was secretly — actually she couldn't hide it — indignant over Tatsuya embarrassing Mayumi.

If Kasumi's thoughts were put into words then it would be something like 'all because he wanted to take a look at Onee-chan in an embarrassing position when she least suspected it!'. She had enough reason left not to call him a 'Damned peeper!' but any way you looked at it, she was unreasonably angry at Tatsuya.

Happily for Tatsuya, Izumi probably didn't share the same rage as Kasumi.

"Miyuki-senpai, do you have plans for what you are going to do later?"

At this time, Izumi's mind was completely full of Miyuki.

"I intend to look at western style clothing for a little while, then return home. Since the tests are next week."

"So, can I join you?"

All pretence of rational thought had flown out of Izumi and she coaxed Miyuki to let her join them. With what is called 'artlessness', she stared at Miyuki with a lust tinged gaze. With great difficulty, Miyuki maintained her smile in the face of the proposal of Izumi who was true to her own desires.

"Hmmm, if Onii-sama says he doesn't mind."

"Izumi-chan, it is wrong to interfere with another family."

Miyuki's reply was neither a yes or a no, but Mayumi's words clearly censured Izumi. By nature, Izumi was quick on the uptake. Being gently scolded by her eldest sister quickly returned her to a rational state.

"You're right. Forgive my rudeness, Miyuki-senpai."

If things had ended here, the Shiba siblings and the Saegusa sisters would have probably parted amicably. However, Kasumi was a little bit more upfront about her feelings than Izumi.

"Right, Izumi. It's wrong to interfere with Shiba-senpai and Shiba-senpai's date."

"Date!?"

For some reason, the one who rapidly responded was Mayumi.

"Kasumi. We're not on a date or anything like that."

Tatsuya's voice was too calm to sound like an embarrassed denial. As usual, this suitably expressionless response violently rubbed Kasumi the wrong way.

"There's nothing on earth that can convince me that a high school boy and a high school girl shopping together alone is not a date."

Mayumi timidly peered at Miyuki's countenance.

For some reason, Miyuki was bearing it all with a broad smile.

"I don't think that's true when the high school boy and the high school girl are brother and sister."

"I think it's altogether useless for siblings to date!"

"Kasumi-chan, you are being incredibly rude."

Izumi broke in from her side speaking in a sharp tone of voice. It was obvious to her that if she didn't lend her a hand, Kasumi was going to go past what is called 'the point of no return'.

Even Kasumi herself understood that she was about to plunge into a bottomless pit of quicksand. However, for some reason, whenever she dealt with Tatsuya, the most trifling thing would set her off. It was unusual for one of a basically summery disposition like Kasumi; even she herself felt it was strange.

However, it wasn't like that realization would win a race against Kasumi's mouth.

"Excellent magicians have a duty to leave an heir! Or are you going to partner with your sister, Shiba-senpai?"

"Kasumi."

However, Kasumi's rampaging tongue was halted by Tatsuya's not very loud voice.

"That being said, isn't it also useless to spend your day off with your sisters?"

"Grr!"

In the blink of an eye, Kasumi's face stiffened and became increasingly red.

To her regret, Tatsuya coolly looked back at the kouhai who was glaring at him.

"Senpai, we will take our leave of you here."

And immediately after breaking eye contact, he made a bow toward Mayumi as he stood up.

"Ah, I should-"

Seeing the bill grasped in Tatsuya's hand, Mayumi abruptly started to rise.

"No, since you have had to endure the childish antics of your kouhai, this is a recompense."

However, there was almost no resistance and Tatsuya went to the register.

Miyuki stood up, bowed to Mayumi and went after Tatsuya.

At the table, Kasumi's sisters were gazing at her face that looked about to cry and pursed lips with worry and remained with her.

After leaving the shop, Miyuki walked a little while then turned around. Naturally, the Saegusa sisters weren't following them. With a slightly relieved look, Miyuki spoke to her brother.

"Umm, Onii-sama. I don't think Kasumi meant any harm."

For an instant, Tatsuya looked back at Miyuki with a strange look and immediately agreed with a wry smile.

"I think so, too."

Tension loosened by Tatsuya's answer, Miyuki let out a huge sigh.

"Even I understood that Kasumi never intended to say that. I only used that logic to keep Kasumi from continuing further but……I was a little too mean."

Tatsuya smiled in a self-depreciating manner, but Miyuki understood that he wasn't seriously attacking himself.

"...I like Onii-sama's habit of not being overly gentle to other girls."

"...You have all the traits needed to be a wicked girl, too."

Miyuki's cheeks swelled with a 'humph!'

That childish action made Tatsuya smile sweetly.

Chapter 4

On Monday, Zhou Gongin visited Kudou Makoto's domain at the promised time.

Makoto welcomed him and replied that he would take responsibility for allowing the refugee occultists to enter the research facility.

Zhou and Makoto were sharing smug smiles when they shook hands and parted.

And regardless of the stringent gag order, Kudou Retsu knew of the meeting an hour after it happened.

"....It is as you have heard. Makoto-dono has promised to accept the refugee occultists. And this Zhou Gongin has not asked for special rewards or conditions. The aforementioned occultists probably intend to conceal their actions under our own."

"Is that so?"

His all white hair elegantly styled and clad in his crisp three piece suit, Kudou Retsu calmly nodded at the report of the old gentleman in the business suit with his head shaved like a monk.

"Is it alright to act unconcerned in this situation, sensei?"

The old gentleman who called Retsu "sensei" was the former master of the Kuki Clan, Kuki Mamoru. He was over sixty years in age, but considering Retsu was about to turn ninety, he was not yet at retirement age. He had turned over the clan to his eldest daughter in order to work as Retsu's hands.

The clans of the Nine had a greater sense of unity than the other numbers. Compared to the relationship of Ten Master Clans and the eighteen associated clans, theirs were more like a main house and branch houses; it was close to that of a lord and his family and their retainers. They could be called a 'traditional faction'; the truth of how they combined their power against mutual enemies with the Kudou clan at their core resided back to their time in Lab 9, but the reason why the Kudou clan became the head - not the Kuki nor the Kuzumi - was due to Kudou Retsu's charisma. Recently Kudou Retsu's influence had---regardless of Makoto's ability to give orders to the lab's employees---considerably thinned, but for the

generation of the previous heads of the Kuki and Kuzumi clans, in short to Mamoru and the rest, Kudou Retsu was still their leader.

"It doesn't matter. There needs to be a modification to the plan but-"

"As you say."

"It just so happens that the day of the Nine Schools Competition that the performance test of the parasite dolls is being held, occultists of the Great Asian Alliance perform some tasks, Nine Schools Competition athletes are grievously injured by extremists manipulating public opinion behind the scenes. And under the instigation of Zhou Gongjin, occultists are sent by the traditional faction to visit our research facility which is cooperating with the extremists."

Retsu's reply to Mamoru's question was mild while still being rude. It would be perfectly normal to regard the situation as altogether too convenient.

However, Mamoru was objecting to Retsu's plan. He was not speaking as if the details of the plan needed retouching, rather he was speaking as if the plan was suddenly collapsing as it went to extremes they weren't expecting; both Mamoru and Retsu knew that.

"Arrangements must be made to keep magic high school students from becoming victims…."

By 'becoming victims', Mamoru meant dying. He was ignoring victims that were merely wounded.

"Don't do anything. The Parasite Dolls already have a limiter preventing them from attacking non-military personnel installed. We intended to have them in guerilla war mode in the current test, but in ordinary battle mode, they will not attack high school students in civilian clothing."

Since it was already understood, Retsu did not assure him that they would not be wounded.

"The limiter wasn't influenced by the occultists."

Mamoru's concern was a natural one; however, Retsu's confidence did not waver.

"From the beginning, it has been impossible for the parasite dolls to get out of control. Both the parasite and the gynoid are tied together by a loyalty

spell. The limiter is part of the loyalty spell that has essentially the same effects as the ancient Celtic Magic, 'Geis'. The restraints of the loyalty spell are a condition for the provisioning the psions needed to allow the parasite to work with the gynoid. If the limiter is released then the psions are all emitted at once and the parasite falls into a coma-like state. The gynoid's chassis becomes a sealing device for the parasite. The defining principle of the loyalty spell is that a price is paid for infractions of the rules."

"You mean even if we are concerned about what Zhou Gongjin's stratagems are, they are fruitless from the start……"

"That's right."

Retsu and Makoto shared a quiet laugh.

"However, then there is no one for the parasite dolls to use violence on?"

Mamoru asked his question in the tone of one exchanging quips. However, Retsu answered it in a very somber voice.

"Soldiers not identified as allies. In short, if the person is armed, he becomes a target for the parasite dolls to attack. I think Kazama-kun's minions will deign to become our opponents."

Retsu's targets were not limited to the extremists or the traditional faction. This was to put an end to the forces that opposed him. Realizing that, Makoto involuntarily straightened his posture.

"Will Kazama really come to take them on? Besides, will Saeki remain silent?"

"He will take them on. At the very least, one person within his command will take them on."

Whatever thoughts were drifting in the back of his mind at this time, Retsu's face continued to be free of emotion.

"If he knows that the Nine Schools Competition is a target, then Miya's son will surely move. Even if he thinks he'll end up being played for a fool, he will have no choice but to intervene."

"Miya…...dono, of the Yotsuba? Someone like that is under Kazama's command?"

Retsu did not answer the question that Makoto asked in a thin voice.

"If he moves then Kazama-kun will have to act as well. If nothing else he will give his tacit consent. Since neither Kazuma-kun nor Saeki can stop him."

Retsu released a small sigh.

***

Two thirds of July had passed, and Tatsuya was finally able to act. In addition to the quarterly exams, he had had to deal with the work piled on him due to the changes in the Nine Schools Competition. The athletes had gained a lot of experience at the new events, Row and Gunner and Shield Down; in this week's bouts, the athletes had won more often than they had lost to their practice partners. The only remaining worry was Steeplechase Cross-country, but other than having them get used to running through the unlandscaped parts of the training forest, there was not a lot that could be done. Since they did not know what any of the obstacles being prepared were, they were not able to come up with clear solutions.

And so he managed to wriggle out some time on the night of Monday, July 21st. Tatsuya was about to plunge into the investigation of the former Lab 9 that Yakumo had planned.

Right now, Tatsuya was relaxing in a private room in a linear train headed to Nara. This was not a bus or a cabinet stowed on a trailer for long distance travel; this was a traditional train for carrying a large number of people at the same time. This type of train remained in service because it prioritized comfort over the convenience of not transferring, thus it was presented as a limited express electric train with green railway cars up to the old standards.

As for why Tatsuya had made this choice while going on a spying mission. That reason was his fellow travelers.

At first, Tatsuya and Yakumo were the only ones going.

Currently, there were four passengers in the private cabin. Tatsuya had been faced with Miyuki begging 'Please take me with you' and Minami simultaneously hitting him with 'If Miyuki-sama goes on a trip, I should go with her to look after her' until he gradually gave in.

"This is a much more pleasant ride than I thought it would be, Oniisama. Besides, I feel that this is quite speedy."

The traveling by linear train had been Miyuki's idea. Certainly, almost all vibrations were effectively dealt with by the cushions and the speed was on par with a short haul plane. However, curiosity was probably her first consideration. In an era that had shifted to a land transportation model where people were moved in small groups, riding a bus was unusual. Traveling in a compartment of a train that transported a large group of people together was a first for both Tatsuya and Miyuki. If even Tatsuya felt this was a little different, then Miyuki's excitement was inevitable. On close inspection, Minami seemed a little buoyant as well.

Yakumo had arranged for this train. He had intended to get a high speed station wagon driven by a former pupil; however, when he learned that Miyuki was coming with them, he had changed his plans. One of the cars would unfortunately check into the hotel late, but this was primarily a safety measure.

There was almost no possibility that the former Lab 9 and the Numbers of 9 knew of their movements. Therefore they didn't believe that they would receive any interference, but had considered the extremely unlikely possibility of a traffic accident occurring just in case. Like the one that had taken place en route to the Nine Schools Competition.

In regard to the linear train on that issue, as long as their adversaries were unwilling to commit an indiscriminate act of terror, an attack that looked like an accident was an impossibility. There was a possibility of an assassin traveling with them mingling in with the other passengers, but with this group an assassin was easier to deal with than an accident.

Naturally, they understood that the possibility of actually being attacked was nearly equal to zero.

In the end, the possibility that their true goal of wanting to make Miyuki and Minami happy was high.

Tatsuya's party got off at Nara station together and separated into two groups. It has been mentioned before, but Yakumo boarded a cabinet headed in the direction of Kyoto intending to move separately.

Tatsuya and the others who saw him off at the station first went to the hotel to check in. They quickly changed clothes after unpacking their luggage. Tatsuya changed from his traveling suit to a long sleeved shirt tucked in at the waist. The material it was made from was advanced, but even so this

was a rather hot outfit for the middle of summer; however, it concealed the CADs worn on both arms so it was unavoidable. It only gave him a temporary peace of mind but he had already sprayed on coolant underneath the shirt beforehand.

When Tatsuya left the room, the quarrel that occurred could be called "expected".

".....So no matter what I say, you are going and leaving me here?"

The gaze Miyuki aimed at Tatsuya made the exaggerated claim that he was a hero embarking on a long trip around the world. She politely clasped both hands together in front of her chest. No matter how much he spoiled his sister, Tatsuya apparently couldn't take it anymore, and his answer was extremely blunt.

"It's dangerous. I'm not taking you."

"I won't be a burden to you!"

"In the first place, this is not an hour when young ladies go out. Miyuki, are you a loose young woman?"

The time was currently a little before 9:00pm. He would certainly think nothing of her going out at this hour on a school day. The remark had just slipped out of Tatsuya's mouth in desperation as he was thinking that he didn't have any power to persuade her, but unexpectedly it was effective.

"Tch....Understood. I will obey Oniisama's order."

Miyuki looked as if she had received a shock, and she nodded with her head bent down in shame.

Where on Earth could she have possibly picked up these acting skills, Tatsuya secretly thought, as he tilted his head.

"Minami. Look after Miyuki."

However, he didn't have any time to waste. Tonight was the only time he could use. After asking Minami to look after Miyuki (he was actually ordering her to guard Miyuki), he opened the door.

"As you wish."

Even without looking, he was aware of Minami's polite bow. She couldn't conceal the happiness over being able to fulfill her duty that spilled out of her voice.

Tatsuya left the area before his head started hurting.

****

Tatsuya left the hotel behind him on the rental bike he had arranged for beforehand in Tokyo and headed toward the former Lab 9. Even so, he could not go inside. He didn't have a reason or pretext for doing so. He was on the public road in front of the research facility precisely at the midpoint between two street lights. He had parked the bike on the side of the road exactly where the light was the weakest.

Around the former Lab 9---currently, the name had been changed to 'The Ninth Kind Magic Development Research Facility' but among magicians it was still nicknamed the former Lab 9---for some reason there were only the scattered detached houses of the people living there; there wasn't even a closed convenience store. It could easily be called a tranquil environment.

With so few people about, even the tiniest whisper would be easily caught by a microphone. With so little pedestrian traffic, even a single person would probably attract attention. With the conditions more difficult than he had anticipated, Tatsuya became cautious in his movements.

From the side bag in front of the bike seat, Tatsuya took out an information terminal. While he was pretending to check to see if he was on the proper road on a navigation app, he was actually using elemental sight on the inside of the research facility. The current published research topic of the former Lab 9 was perception magic. The actual state of affairs might be different, but even if it was only a pretext, it didn't mean that they didn't do any development of perception magic.

Even Tatsuya did not have full knowledge of all current magic. Without a melee or any other type of noise in this situation, there was a possibility that he could be detected by unknown means if he used Elemental Sight.

(But compared to sneaking in, the risk is smaller.)

As he told himself that, he used his bird's-eye view of ideas.

At first, the entire research facility entered his field of vision. Since they had chosen the Nine Schools Competition as the stage for their experiment, the P-weapon should be a weapon that used magic spells. Since they seemed to be holding a test against magician opponents, it might be a weapon that emitted magic or a weapon that inhibited magic.

Tatsuya had hypothesized two types of weapons that emitted magic. One was a weapon that used a substance like a Nino Magatama[9] that preserved magic sequences. Half a year had passed since Tatsuya had begun his analysis of Nino Magatama, but he didn't have anything to show for it yet. However, the Former Lab 9 might have succeeded in preserving magic sequences.

The other one was a parasite and a humanoid form droid fused into a Combat Robot. Because Pixie was an example, this one had a higher probability.

Whichever one it was, he observed thick psions. If there was a device that stored magic sequences then this was the stored magic sequence. If there was a combat robot then these were the accumulation of psions that belonged to the parasite housed within.

As for the possibilities for a weapon that interfered with magic, for now he hadn't considered it. Even if it used antinite, he possessed a pseudo-cast jamming technique himself so he was aware that he wouldn't be able to distinguish it from a normal CAD. Searching for something he wouldn't be able to recognize was futile.

He carefully examined the entire research facility. As he expected, there was a thick concentration of psions in one section. He tightened the focus of his 'observation power' on that section.

(Parasite containment……..a female model robot?)

***

At the same time that Tatsuya discovered the Parasite Doll.

"---Yes?"

Reception called the room Miyuki and Minami were staying in.

Minami picked up the phone of an old fashioned design with a speaker and microphone in the handset and turned toward Miyuki.

"Miyuki-oneesama."

In the house, she carelessly called her Miyuki-sama. However, Minami had unconsciously made a decision that in places where other people could hear her, she would use the exact address she had been told to use.

"A guest is here for a face to face meeting."

"A face to face meeting? With me? May I ask for a name?"

"Yes."

Minami exchanged a few words with reception through the mike and this time when she turned around her face looked nervous.

"Kuroba Mitsugu-sama and Ayako-sama. They are in the lobby."

Minami infected Miyuki with her nervousness.

"Inform them that I will come down immediately."

Miyuki gave Minami those directions and hurriedly turned toward the mirror.

Miyuki proceeded to the lobby, accompanied by Minami, where the Kuroba father and daughter certainly were.

"Ah, Miyuki-chan. It's been a while."

Mitsugu spotted Miyuki with his keen eyes and called out to her; however, Miyuki only returned the greeting and met him halfway.

"Uncle, it has been a while since you have called on me."

Having tied on courtesy, the distance between them shortened; Miyuki deeply bent at the waist.

"Yes, but the most important thing is that we are both so healthy, Miyuki-chan."

Mitsugu replied with an amicable smile. It wasn't just a look on his face; the same smile was also showing in both of his eyes. At the very least, Miyuki couldn't see through Mitsugu's performance with her powers of observation.

"Ayako-chan, it's been about three months. Thank you for lending your various abilities to us in the spring incident."

Was she smiling to the same degree as Mitsugu? Miyuki didn't believe she was.

"You're welcome. If I was of assistance to Tatsuya-san and Miyuki-oneesama, then I am pleased."

Therefore when she saw the light of challenge emitting from Ayako's pupils in her smiling face, Miyuki was a little relieved.

"Why are we standing around talking? How about we sit and talk? You there, Sakurai Minami-kun. Come with us as well."

Mitsugu gave orders to Miyuki and Minami in the guise of a suggestion. Miyuki was under no obligation to obey Mitsugu, but even without an obligation to obey, Miyuki obediently followed behind Mitsugu.

Mitsugu escorted the two of them (if his daughter was included, the three of them) not to a sofa in the lobby, but to the hotel's tea room; he took them to a lounge styled like a private room.

"This hotel is under the patronage of the main family. Although, I didn't think Miyuki-chan knew."

Mitsugu had suddenly unleashed a preemptive strike by giving out confidential information in a mischievous tone without a hint of good will. Miyuki maintained her smiling face, albeit with difficulty.

"Is that so? Kokonoe-sensei arranged for this place……...what an incredible coincidence?"

"Kokonoe Yakumo-san? Then this might be the opposite of happenstance; he must have done some investigating."

Kuroba Mitsugu along with the Kuroba clan felt wary of the name Kokonoe Yakumo.

It seemed like Miyuki's reply was worth a passing grade by Mitsugu's standards; the edges of his lips trembled slightly.

"Now then, sit, sit. You too, Minami-chan. Feel free to sit down."

The first to sit, Mitsugu urged them with his hand from his chair.

"Yes, pardon me."

Besides answering, Miyuki sat down, followed by Ayako and then Minami in order.

"It's already late in the evening; please let us complete our business quickly."

"Forgive us for hurrying. Our car is waiting for us."

Ayako bowed her head slightly to Miyuki as she supplemented her father's statement.

"Ah, please do not worry about it. If you are sparing me this time when you are on the verge of leaving, then you must have something important to speak about. Right, Uncle?"

While demonstrating that she understood the implicit message that they were not staying here tonight, Miyuki agreed to their wishes.

"That's right. After all, we haven't made plans to stay the night."

After inserting the preface that didn't need to be said, Mitsugu got down to business.

"The issue is the experiment being held at this year's Nine Schools Competition."

"The experimental performance test of Weapon P, which is scheduled to take place during Steeplechase Cross Country?"

"You know about Weapon P?" Mitsugu spoke up seemingly surprised. It seemed that he hadn't thought that Miyuki knew of the weapon's code name. However, he immediately collected himself and his inner thoughts were once again behind a hard to read smile.

"No, just the code name. Oniisama is gone right now and investigating the truth about it."

"Oh……."

Mitsugu constructed and displayed an 'aw nuts' look at Miyuki's words.

"Uncle, what is it?"

She knew that this was bait; however, she didn't know what kind - whether it was something to her advantage or disadvantage. Miyuki couldn't decide. If it was a choice between 'taking the bait' or 'not taking the bait', then she would choose to 'take it'.

"Actually, we were just investigating the truth about Weapon P as well."

Agitation ran through Miyuki's eyes. She didn't say anything. It wasn't that she was swallowing her words, it was more like she had no words. Next to her, Minami was wide-eyed with one hand on her mouth.

They didn't raise an eyebrow at Miyuki's reaction, which in a certain sense was exactly what they wanted. Mitsugu signaled to Ayako with his eyes. Ayako took out a data card for use with a mobile phone information terminal from her handbag.

Ayako had a slightly triumphant expression on her face as she handed Miyuki the data card.

"The results of the inquiry concerning the Parasite Doll, Weapon P. Please use it, Miyuki-oneesama."

"Parasite Doll? That's……"

"I believe it is just as you are thinking, Oneesama. A Parasite Doll is a weapon that utilizes a parasite."

Ayako's smile as she answered was the opposite of Miyuki's scowl.

"As expected, a lot of effort was needed this time. The opposition is a fellow member of the Ten Master Clans; if this leaks, there's no mistake that the issue of the development of a weapon that utilizes a demonic entity will become a target for the media. The makeup of their defenses is extremely harsh. I believe investigating it in a single night is too difficult for even Tatsuya-san."

Decoding the meaning behind the boastfulness of Ayako's statements, Miyuki could not ignore the detail she noticed.

"Ayako-chan acquired this……."

"No, no. This wasn't Ayako's efforts alone."

And Miyuki's question was answered by Mitsugu with a partial negation that affirmed Ayako's involvement.

"Besides, as you well know, Ayako's magic is suited for intelligence. Miyuki-chan is suited for combat and suppression. It's only natural that your specialized fields are different."

What Mitsugu said was the objective truth. Especially in a situation involving the suppression of a mass of enemies, Ayako couldn't hold a candle to Miyuki. However, while looking at the data card in her own hand, the truth did not comfort Miyuki.

At the moment, the power to expose the conspiracy between the military and the Kudou clan was needed by Tatsuya.

At the moment, the one being useful to Tatsuya was not herself, but Ayako.

"Forgive us for summoning you. While this is rude, we really do not have much time. Excuse us for leaving."

"Please give Tatsuya our regards."

It took all of Miyuki's strength to give a mechanical reply to the pair who left their seats.

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At the Former Lab '9' section where the psion concentration was thick, there were the same type of things as Pixie - gynoids possessed by parasites. While he was staring at them wondering why they were female shaped models, Tatsuya became aware that a conditionally activated spell was starting.

(This is? It seems like mental interference type magic, but...)

(The spell resembles Luna Strike, but it's all been inserted into the gynoid. I can't see which part of the mechanism it's been inserted into. Got it, I can feel the ill-fitting signs from an add-on being made afterwards coming from that magic sequence.)

(Luna paralyzes the mind by forcibly loosening the bonds of will so that emotions will run rampant through a phantom blow. This is …..magic that will make the parasite go berserk?)

Intentionally making a weapon go out of control, the senselessness of it confused Tatsuya. Just then, his information terminal alarm rang. Tatsuya's mind was brought back from the information dimension to the physical dimension otherwise known as this world.

The sound indicated the transmission of an emergency email. Tatsuya quickly opened the email. The transmission origin was blank, the same as email sent from one's own home. The text was 'Please get away from here immediately'.

This message in this situation said that someone knew Tatsuya was here - someone who had a reason to warn him. Immediately after Tatsuya confirmed the person's identity, an indication of an impending magic attack was reflected in his 'eye'.

It was a release type-Lightning magic and a mental interference type - an illusion magic. He had been almost completely unaware of the impending strike. Even if he got his CAD out now, he wouldn't be in time.

After Tatsuya made that assessment, the psions housed in both hands vigorously thundered out.

With the sound of a clap, psions explosively scattered.

Gram Demolition. Anti-magic that blew away magic sequences through the pressure of psions.

Partly due to not being given directionality and also due to him using a greater quantity of psions than usual, the point of impact was obscured.

Tatsuya practically flew onto the bike and promptly took off.

The thick mist of psions became a magical smokescreen that hindered pursuit from the former Lab 9.

***

The next morning. The party was returning to Tokyo. Unlike the previous day, Miyuki was wearing a depressed look on her face. Though she had intended to appear the same as usual, his sister's smile seemed clouded to Tatsuya's eyes.

Going back in the same private cabin of the linear train they came in was by no means boring. Tatsuya had returned to the hotel yesterday evening

close to midnight. At that time, she had merely seemed tired. When they met face to face this morning, he hadn't received the impression anything was wrong either.

However, as they met up with Yakumo, boarded the linear train, faced each other in the cabin---for some reason, Miyuki did not sit down next to Tatsuya as usual---her face gradually clouded and immediately became the face of someone forcing herself to smile.

It wasn't just the face of someone who didn't feel well. After about fifteen minutes, they'd be in Tokyo, but this was not the kind of anomaly he could leave alone until they got in the house. Naturally, he was interested in what Yakumo, who had maneuvered independently, had discovered. However, right now Tatsuya felt he had to make Miyuki his first priority.

"Miyuki, did something happen. Or are you worried about something……"

"Tatsuya-niisama."

"It's okay, Minami-chan."

To cover for Miyuki, Minami tried to hold off Tatsuya's query. However, Miyuki in her turn blocked that, and put her hand in her pouch. She held out a small type of data card for use in mobile phone terminals.

"This is?"

Tatsuya took the card with a frown and questioned her.

"Last night at the hotel, Kuroba-ojisama and Ayako-chan entrusted this with me."

"They visited you at the hotel?"

Hearing Miyuki's answer, Tatsuya turned toward Yakumo while frowning. How did the Kuroba father and daughter know Miyuki was staying at that hotel? They hadn't taken any special measures to conceal it, but it wasn't like the Yotsuba normally kept Miyuki under observation. If they needed her for something, they wouldn't be able to immediately pin down her location.

"Oh, right. That hotel is under Yotsuba sponsorship. Was that unwise?"

Tatsuya's stare was sharp but Yakumo, who was sitting beside him, seemed unmoved as he confessed confidential information. No, confess

was probably not the right term. After all, Yakumo did not see it as doing anything wrong. Tatsuya himself did not have an excuse to castigate his teacher.

"Inside is Weapon P's---the parasite doll's data and the results of the inquiry into the upcoming experiment."

"Parasite Doll…..is that what Weapon P is?"

While he repeated the name Miyuki applied to Weapon P, Tatsuya made the connection to the female model robots he had 'observed' last night.

Parasite Doll----'Parasite' 'Doll'.

He didn't think the naming was overly direct but it was easy to understand. The gynoid resting in the former Lab 9 was clearly a doll with a parasite housed inside---a Parasite Doll.

"Ayako-chan said it was."

Not Mitsugu, Ayako. Listening to that, the reason Miyuki was depressed was revealed to Tatsuya. That Ayako felt a passionate rivalry to Miyuki since she was a child was obvious to anyone who looked; however, Tatsuya was aware that Miyuki also secretly regarded Ayako as a rival. The pair's specialties were completely different but Miyuki was still too much of a child to accept that distinction.

Tatsuya kept the data card in its case and put it in his pocket. He was interested in the contents but they were just about to arrive in Tokyo and who knows who might be watching or listening to them. ……That was the official reason he gave himself, but actually he didn't want to do anything that looked like he was praising Ayako's performance.

---The information Ayako had passed to Miyuki while accompanying Mitsugu was not unworthy of praise.

"Tatsuya-kun, won't you show me what's inside?"

Yakumo was about to make his care come to naught.

"Master, we're nearly at the station."

If he refused too strongly, it would be noticed by Miyuki, so Tatsuya paid attention to his tone as he made his indirect refusal.

"Don't we still have enough time."

"We'd be cutting it close."

"It's fine, Oniisama."

Tatsuya looked as if he was going to keep refusing to the end. However, Miyuki leaned forward toward her brother, while peering downward she shook her head from side to side.

Tatsuya's rebuttal remained on his tongue, but he silently bowed his head and agreed with Miyuki. After all, his sister had become aware of what he was doing, so he realized going any further would not be for Miyuki's sake but for his own.

"Master, do you have a terminal."

"It's fine, I have one."

Tatsuya had taken out a cable to connect the terminal to his own directly. It had been a single overnight trip, so he had only brought one handheld terminal. He and Yakumo pressed their shoulders together as they looked at the small screen. The instant he thought about doing it, he realized it wouldn't be all that pleasant a configuration.

After Yakumo confirmed that the cord was connected to his own terminal, Tatsuya played back the data on the card he had gotten from Miyuki. Despite the contents being only text and simple diagrams, he scrolled through it at high speed as usual. Yakumo easily kept up with that speed.

Reading this amount of data normally would take fifteen to twenty minutes, but they scanned it in three minutes. Yakumo made a slightly smug look.

"Going there was effective."

Perhaps this was his way of being considerate. If Miyuki was in her normal state, she would have probably made a complacent wicked smile. He probably expected some kind of feedback, but before Tatsuya could ask a question, Yakumo transmitted data from his own terminal.

Simple dossiers had flowed through the cable. There were three photos attached. All the names and features were classic chinese.

"These are …..the personal data of refugee occultists from the Great Asia Alliance?"

"Occultists who were smuggled in from the continent last week."

Yakumo nodded his agreement with Tatsuya's doubt concerning the additional information about the date and time. Tatsuya immediately understood the reason.

"I think the timing is a little too good."

The magic the occultists specialized in were also recorded in the dossier. Wood and stone, a chinese magic that manipulates puppets made out of metal. A mental interference type of magic that temporarily gave a puppet will by working through an isolated information body. Special mention was made of a technique that took over control of isolated information bodies under the control of other magicians; it was written that it was a proficient technique for making an isolated information body go berserk once out of the control of the magician. All of the techniques that special mention was made of were examples of the same type of magic that Tatsuya had discovered within the parasite doll---the other one of Pixie's kind at the former Lab 9.

"This is probably not a coincidence. People they could use in the current experiment were summoned."

"Use? If they were not summoned by the Kudou clan's designs……...no, hmmm."

While he was asking, Tatsuya grasped the answer to his own question. What he himself had thought last night. Making your own weapon go out of control was senseless. Normally, only the enemy wanted your weapon to go out of control.

"This incident is not a straightforward affair. Although if you realize that, it might be a simple design."

It was truly as Yakumo said, thought Tatsuya. Overly elaborate preparations were being coiled around a simple stratagem by others' wills and even more expectations were being acquired at each phase of implementation. In the end, after everything was finished it would be impossible to tell what the thrust of the actual experiment was…….

Just then, the "about to arrive at the station" message was displayed on a cabin panel. They did not hear an announcement.

"Minami, thank you for your hard work."

They had been on a deadline and this place was the only opening they had. With that in mind, Tatsuya had spoken to Minami.

Minami nodded and abruptly turned off her power. Instantly, the repeated announcement reached their ears. The psion shield and sound proofing field Minami had put up had been released.

Her gaze went once again to Tatsuya who had thanked her and Minami made a bow while remaining seated.

Chapter 5

The opening party for the Nine Schools Competition was on the 2nd this year, with the competition properly starting on the 5th and finally ending on the 15th. This meant that the competition schedule would last 11 days, one more than last year.

Although the number of days had changed, the venue hadn't. First High's competition group set out on the day of the opening party at 8am as usual. The large bus and engineering van headed for the hotel next to the venue.

The group was comprised of 12 men and 12 women for the main division, 9 men and 9 women for the newcomers division, 8 technical staff and 4 strategists for a total of 54, two more than last year. This was due to the change in competition rules. However, even with the increase there was room to spare in the large bus. Last year all the technical staff had ridden in the van, but this year four were in the van and four in the bus. Two of the four technicians in the bus were Tatsuya and Isori. Since they served as strategists on top of their technician work, they should have been included in the bus as part of the operative staff anyway, but the ones who had insisted on the two's inclusion could easily be guessed.

There were two freshman additions to the technical team this year, one boy and one girl. The male, Smith Kent, was focused on Tatsuya as he moved about, while the female shot Tatsuya cold looks.

"Why is that guy taking a maid robot to the Nine Schools Competition?"

Kasumi murmured venomously while staring at Pixie, who was situated at the rear hatch of their work vehicle.

"Kasumi-chan, it's rude to Shiba-senpai to call him 'that guy'. And it's not a maid robot. It's a Humanoid Home Helper."

Izumi chided Kasumi nervously. For a while, Kasumi's attitude towards Tatsuya had seemed to have been improving, but ever since that event before the tests, Kasumi's stance had increasingly hardened.

Not even Izumi knew why Kasumi disliked Tatsuya so much. The incident had been more than half Kasumi's own fault after all. Even though Izumi felt Tatsuya's retort had been a bit too sharp, it wasn't the reason behind their bad compatibility, which was why Izumi didn't comment on Kasumi's snarking itself.

She simply didn't want her elder twin sister's comments to be overheard by Miyuki. Miyuki held a deep respect for Tatsuya to say the least, and would not lightly brush off such words as a joke. In short, Izumi's warning of Kasumi was simply and egotistically motivated by not wanting to leave a bad impression on her dear senpai.

"Maid robot or 3H or whatever. It's the same thing."

Fortunately, Kasumi was unaware of her younger twin's dark thoughts. This wasn't because Kasumi was dull, or pure, but because her mind was so bent on denouncing Tatsuya.

"If all he needed was a HAR interface, there was no need to make it look like a cute, little girl."

"The appearance of the 3H is modeled on a 25 year old. Calling that a little girl is somewhat....."

"T-that's not the problem! I'm saying there's no need to make it so pretty! The main users of HARs are girls, so having it look like some plain Oba-san is good enough!"

Izumi didn't quite agree with Kasumi that aesthetics were unimportant, but since she thought Kasumi had a point this time, she didn't argue. .....Not that anything she said would have reached through Kasumi's hot-headed state anyway.

"In the end, the reason 3Hs are made to look so pretty is to cater to perverted guys who think, 'I want to be taken care of by a beautiful girl!' To bring something like that to the Nine Schools Competition....."

"Kasumi."

Kasumi was so engrossed in her spiel that she never noticed the senior approaching her from behind until she was called. Jerking upright, she timidly looked around.

"What are you so worked up about?"

An inquisitive face looked back.

"N-no, nothing."

"Oh? Well, we're about to leave."

Kasumi sighed with relief as it seemed her speech just then hadn't been overheard. Looking around, it appeared most of their seniors and fellow juniors had already gotten on the bus.

"I'm sorry, Kitayama-senpai!"

"We've caused you trouble."

It seemed she had come to call on her fellow Public Morals Committee member and Izumi by coincidence. With a grateful look, the twins sneaked onto the back half of the bus.

◊ ◊ ◊

This year there were neither any unpleasantries on the bus nor accidents, and the delegation from First High arrived at the hotel safely. No minor troubles occurred either, as everything went according to plan, and now the opening party was approaching.

Tatsuya had already entered the venue. Unlike last year, he was in his own uniform. Gazing at the eight spoked gear emblem now adorning his uniform, Miyuki smiled happily.

"Miyuki, what are you smiling at?"

Although limited to Miyuki, Tatsuya could immediately tell whether she had on a fake or genuine smile. Upon seeing his sister suddenly in such a joyous mood, Tatsuya asked that question.

"The Magic Engineering uniform looks good on you, Onii-sama. I'm happy."

"What, that again? You've been looking at it for four months now, haven't you?"

Tatsuya looked slightly taken aback. —Behind Miyuki, Minami eyed him coldly in a 'what is this person seriously saying?' way, but in this place she was the minority.

"I think so as well, Tatsuya-san!"

"Me too."

Enthusiastically (competitively?) Honoka spoke her assent, while Shizuku likewise chimed in.

"Yeah. I guess it's because the last one was borrowed. It somehow doesn't feel like you came properly last year."

Eimi nodded in agreement to Subaru's words. It appeared all of the second year female competitors were of one mind with Miyuki.

The main competition had competitors not only from second year but third year as well. Having taken last year's Newcomers Division by storm, the current second years were five of the twelve women's representatives.

Miyuki was in Ice Pillars Break solo, Shizuku in pairs with Kanon, Honoka and Subaru in Mirage Bat, and Eimi part of the Rower and Gunner pair. Tatsuya was surrounded by these five plus the first year Minami. Although Tatsuya himself would deny it, from an outsider's perspective it looked like he had quite the harem. Furthermore, his fellow second years Tomitsuka and Morisaki, as well as Mikihiko, who was selected for Monolith Code, had been nabbed by their PMC and club activities senior Sawaki and were sequestered amongst the third years.

Tatsuya was not particularly bad with women. In fact, they didn't really bother him at all. But as expected, being the lone male within that group of six females, all of them stunning to boot, was rather agitating, even for him. At the previous opening party, Subaru and Eimi had kept their distance and not approached, so that was a change. From Subaru's remark earlier however, they had been checking him out even then.

In order to avoid overly staring at the ladies, Tatsuya swept his eyes around the hall. Within, he spotted an 'acquaintance', who was likewise surrounded by girls.

He also seemed to pick up on Tatsuya. Perhaps he sensed his gaze. Towing a gaggle of schoolgirls wearing the same uniform of Third High in his wake, Ichijou Masaki approached Tatsuya.

Tatsuya likewise walked forwards, as if to greet him. Honoka and Eimi naturally moved aside, and Tatsuya and Masaki met with accompanying schoolgirls behind them. —However, Masaki was not the sole male, as the figure of Kichijouji Shinkurou stood beside him.

".....It's been a while, Shiba-san."

The first words Masaki spoke, however, were directed towards Miyuki.

"Yes. It has been a long time, Ichijou-san."

As Ichijou smiled tensely with considerable effort, and while Miyuki responded with a stunning fake smile, everyone eyed each other awkwardly. Before that dampened atmosphere settled in, Kichijouji followed up.

"Not since Yokohama. It's good to see you haven't changed, Shiba Tatsuya-kun."

"It's good to see you're doing well, Kichijouji."

Although it seemed like his words were blunt, Tatsuya responded with a friendly expression, then turned to face the one beside him.

"You too, Ichijou. You were outstanding at Yokohama. Truly the Crimson Prince."

"......Please don't say that."

Being called his nickname by Tatsuya in his dead serious voice, Masaki subtly frowned.

"You don't like it? I'm not making fun of you or anything."

"I'm just against ostentation. Simply Ichijou is fine, right?"

"Alright."

Obediently — or rather, innocently — Tatsuya nodded. At that, Masaki seemed slightly taken aback. Just what it was he found so surprising, he did not say.

"By the way Shiba.....oh, do you mind being called that way?"

"No problem."

Around them, the girls from First and Third High had already begun intermingling. There was a hint of reservation on the part of the Third High girls (who they were wary of was obvious), but harmonious chatter prevailed. To that backdrop of girls' voices, Masaki lowered his tone of voice and spoke to Tatsuya.

"Don't you think something's strange about this year's Nine Schools Competition?"

Although this was a fairly abrupt topic, Masaki's expression was serious. Kichijouji's likewise.

"Is it that strange? I only really know about last year's Nine Schools Competition, so I can't tell."

Tatsuya's words were only half the tale. In fact, he had a suspicion as to what it was Masaki was referring to. However, Tatsuya couldn't be sure. He decided he needed to hear Masaki out more clearly first.

"I can understand the changes to the games."

"It's assumable that the Nine Schools Competition management guidelines do call for the events to change."

It seemed Kichijouji likewise didn't intend to just step back after introductions, joining the conversation.

"A trend towards more militant events is also evident, but given the situation in recent years, that's almost reasonable."

"The last event however, Steeplechase Cross Country, stands out."

"Right. That's going too far — it's of a completely different nature."

"Originally, it was an Army training exercise for forest warfare. Naming it as an event is curious already. While there's been little information disclosed and the only details I have are sketchy.....an area of four kilometers is something even active troops rarely use, and seems more to be for large scale exercises."

"Putting that in a competition for high school magicians, and on the tiring final day at that, there are too many risks."

"Furthermore, all second and third years will be participating. It's not compulsory, but seeing how all players who finish within an hour net points for their school, there aren't likely going to be any sitting out."

"There's more. This isn't a nice way to put it, but the Nine Schools Competition is a kind of show. It cannot be denied that aspects of the Nine Schools Competition are spectacles for magicians to appeal to society."

"But you cannot spectate any part of Steeplechase Cross Country whatsoever. Even in the forest stage of Monolith Code, it's possible to watch the offense and defense occurring around the monoliths. The same cannot be said for SCCC."

"If the intent isn't for the spectators or TV broadcast, I can only conclude that there's a different purpose."

"For such an event to be allowed and carried out, I feel that this Nine Schools Competition is not simply for us magic high school students to contest our skills, but has again been encroached upon by another will."

Listening to Masaki and Kichijouji, Tatsuya was impressed. He had been prompted by the message from an unknown sender to investigate into the depths of this year's Nine Schools Competition. But these two, likely of their own cognisance, had detected the factors intervening behind the scenes.

"Are those the investigative results of the Ichijou family?"

"Nn? No, that's a bit.....do you think that's necessary?"

"If you have concerns and a means to investigate, it's better to do so. Well, if you have no resources to spare in devoting to this matter, that's a different story."

That was Tatsuya's answer to Masaki's question. He had no intention of provocation, but it couldn't be helped if his way of speaking caused Masaki to take it as so.

"Of course we do for something of this scale! What I meant was if there was a need to go so far!"

"The phrase 'there are some things best left unknown' is a lie. While plenty of troubles have arisen due to lack of knowledge, I have never heard of a case where excess intel interfered. Have you ever had such an experience, Ichijou?"

"No, but compared to that, this is....."

"There are 12 more days until the last day of the Nine Schools Competition and the Steeplechase event. I won't say it's plenty, but I won't say it's at the point to give up as nothing can be done either."

"Masaki, in this I think Shiba-kun's right."

Kichijouji spoke out in appeasement to Masaki, who stood with his lips pursed.

"Our hands are full now, but I think Gouki-san may be able to find something out."

Gouki-san was the name of the Ichijou head, or Masaki's father. Kichijouji's words were supporting Tatsuya's.

"......Got it. I'll explain to the family."

Masaki spoke not to Kichijouji, but to Tatsuya.

While Tatsuya, Masaki and Kichijouji had their super serious talk that was somewhat unfitting for a party, the First and Third high schoolgirls enjoyed their conversation without disturbing them. It was then that they were hailed by a male student from Fourth high.

"Shizuku-san."

"Harumi-niisan."

Two voices replied back. Honoka also knew the youth, Naruse Harumi, and the two exchanged nods.

At Shizuku calling him 'niisan', Miyuki recalled that Shizuku's cousin attended Fourth high. As she recollected, she was able to divert her attention from the Fourth high juniors who followed behind him and feigned ignorance.

After leaving the group and exchanging words with her cousin, nodding several times, Shizuku came back to Miyuki.

"Miyuki, I have a favor to ask."

Shizuku's expression was slightly apologetic.

"What is it?"

"My cousin would like to introduce his kouhai to Tatsuya-san."

"To Onii-sama?"

While wearing a quizzical expression, Miyuki thought 'so that's why they came'.

"Yes. My cousin is in Fourth high, but his kouhai had heard about Tatsuya-san and wanted to meet him."

Each magic high school had its own focus. First and Second high taught along international standards. Third high had a militaristic tradition and focused on magic as a means of combat. Conversely, Fourth high was inclined towards magic craftsmanship and engineering of the sort that would be practiced in laboratories.

"It will be up to Onii-sama, but I don't think he will be against it."

With that, Miyuki went over to Tatsuya. Conveniently, the talk with Masaki and Kichijouji was winding down.

"Onii-sama, are you free? Some juniors from Fourth high said they would like to meet you."

"Me? Ah, alright."

Masaki and Kichijouji nodded, convinced for a different reason from Tatsuya's realization. That was how much 'Fourth High' and 'Tatsuya's track record' were compatible.

"Ichijou-san, Kichijouji-san, is it alright if we borrow Onii-sama for a bit?"

"I-it's fine. No problem. We have just finished up."

Miyuki smiled gracefully to Masaki, who got flustered again at being spoken to by her, bowed, and then led Tatsuya to where Shizuku was waiting.

"Later, Ichijou."

No reply came to Tatsuya's parting remark. Masaki's consciousness was utterly fixated on Miyuki's smile.

"I am Kuroba Fumiya. Pleased to meet you, Shiba-senpai."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Kuroba Ayako. We are twins, with Fumiya being the younger. It's a pleasure, Shiba-senpai."

Being introduced by Shizuku's cousin, Fumiya and Ayako greeted Tatsuya as if 'for the first time'. There was nothing unnatural at all about their introductions.

"Good to meet you, I'm Shiba Tatsuya."

Likewise, Tatsuya was the same.

"However, I'm from First high; I'm not your senpai."

"Even if the school is different, Shiba-san is our senpai in magic."

"Although we're from Fourth high, our technical abilities aren't very good. Yet if it's ok with you, could we look to you for guidance? Both me and my brother have been very impressed by Shiba-senpai's skills."

Of course, this was all to make it easier for Ayako and Fumiya to contact Tatsuya. This was why Miyuki made no move which could have ruined the acting of the two, and since they had no confidence in pretending to be other people, they came as themselves.

"During the Nine Schools Competition will be impossible, but if there are other opportunities I have no problems."

"Really!?"

"Thank you very much. By all means."

For the two of them, particularly the male Fumiya, to avoid talking with the beauty Miyuki was only natural, but this too was to facilitate the illusion of their first meeting. Having safely made the impression that they and Tatsuya were strangers, they went back to the Fourth high group.

The party followed a buffet format with no allocated seats, but, as it was like this every year, each school had their own general area. When Masaki

went back to Third high's table, the Third high schoolgirls followed after him.

It was almost time for the introduction of the guests. With no more acquaintances to chat with, Tatsuya likewise returned to First high's table with the other girls.

"Tatsuya, who were those Fourth high students?"

As he arrived, Mikihiko slid up next to him and inquired.

"The two first years?"

Of course Tatsuya had noticed him. He therefore didn't let out any sign of surprise at that sudden hail, but responded naturally.

"Yes.....those two, they identified themselves as 'Kuroba', didn't they?"

"You were lip reading?"

Tatsuya's voice held a hint of reproach. Of course, it was intentional.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop."

On the other hand, Mikihiko's guilt-ridden voice held no deception. His earnest temperament meant that he would probably have felt bad whether he actually did or not.

"It's fine. It's not like we talked about anything sensitive."

Receiving Tatsuya's acquittal, Mikihiko looked relieved.

His expression soon darkened again, however.

"Is there something bothering you about those two?"

Passing Tatsuya a glass of water, Mikihiko hesitantly opened his mouth.

"This is a rumor that started around spring...that there's a separate family under the Yotsuba called Kuroba. Even amongst the subordinate branches of the Yotsuba, the Kuroba are particularly strong."

"This spring is pretty sudden...you think those two are related to the Yotsuba?"

"I'm not 100% certain."

"While Kuroba is indeed a rare name, you nonetheless can't rule out there being others, right?"

"In that case the name Yotsuba isn't particularly rare itself."

Tatsuya's makeshift reasoning was crushed by Mikihiko using the same logic.

Going further might simply cement that view in his eyes. Thinking so, Tatsuya shifted angles.

"I see. So are you saying I should stay away from them?"

"That's not.....well, a bit. At the least, you shouldn't take the initiative to approach them."

"So it's fine if they approach me?"

"Trouble always finds you, so it can't be helped."

Tatsuya felt that was quite mean. He considered returning the sarcasm, but unfortunately didn't quite get the chance. The floor lighting switched as the introduction of the guests began.

First there was a short greeting by the base commander who had provided the venue for the Nine Schools Competition — more like a briefing — then the Magic Association director and chancellor of the national Magic Universities took to the stage one after the other. After this eminent lineup that highschoolers normally wouldn't have the opportunity to see, Kudou Retsu should have rounded out the session with his annual greeting.

However this year concluded without the usual "elder's address".

Murmurs started up at this unexpected turn of events. Not just amongst the students, but the guests as well. The students of First high were no exception. However, there were also students exceptionally discussing the reason — or circumstance — behind this occurrence.

"Apparently the elder is not well."

As Honoka looked left and right with a confused expression, Shizuku came up from behind and spoke to her.

"Shizuku, really?"

She nodded to Honoka, who turned around looking surprised.

"I heard it over there."

Shizuku turned towards where an invited MP was conversing with a Magic Association secretary. Just which one had it been. .....Either one was just as likely, decided Miyuki, who was listening in by the side.

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Among First High female players, five of them were 2nd years, seven were 3rd years. Each hotel room could accommodate two. And so it was possible to pair a 3rd year and a 2nd year together (while at it, there were nine female 1st years so there was an odd man out, but since there was a 1st year female tech staff chosen this year for apprenticeship purposes, this made them even at ten and avoided sharing rooms with upperclassmen).

Room assignments for 2nd years were Honoka and Shizuku for one room, Eimi and Subaru for another. *It was decided* that the 2nd year odd-man out Miyuki would go with 3rd year odd-man out Kanon.

For tech staff, three were 3rd year males, one 3rd year female, one 2nd year male, one 2nd year female, one 1st year male and one 1st year female. They would form pairs with one third year pairing up with one second year. As a result, *it was decided* that Tatsuya would share with Isori.

And for that something amiss had occurred.

There were no nighttime roll calls in the 9SC accommodations. Being a military facility, there were night sentries patrolling about, but none would enter the rooms. And so Miyuki and Kanon shared a room. Tatsuya and Isori shared another. It wasn't much of a problem. At least the First High representatives, 1st years excluded, thought of it as reasonable. And standing in front of Tatsuya, having retired from the party, wasn't Isori but Miyuki.

"Elder Kudou was absent this time, right?"

Miyuki was sitting upright on the bed, talking with Tatsuya who was changing clothes; on her lap was a suitcase with her change of clothes

inside. Whether she was here for a simple chat or here only to play was not an issue.

"From what Shizuku had learned, his condition seems to have worsened ..."

"Must be a cover up. Well, even if some abnormality may come to his physical, mental, or emotional state, there's a separate reason for skipping the party."

Taken literally, Kudou Retsu had gone insane. Miyuki was astounded at Tatsuya's conclusion. Though the siblings were the only ones in the room, it was plainly an unrestrained ruthless remark against the head of Japan's magic community.

But speaking of being astounded, the truth was that Tatsuya was by far strongly and vehemently exasperated at Miyuki. No matter how much she was begged by Kanon, no matter that Kanon and Isori were engaged, Tatsuya thought there was something wrong with the *helping hand* to allow a young lad and lass to spend the night together before getting married.

In his thoughts, there was no running from the fact that he would be staying in the same room with Miyuki. Forget running, even resistance would be futile. Tatsuya's biggest worry was that if word of this got out, his sister's reputation would be damaged. On the other hand, he thought it was convenient to have Miyuki stay in the same room instead of Isori. That was the reason he didn't drive Miyuki out.

"...Even so, using sickness as an excuse meant he has shut himself in at his home. Or at least he shouldn't have come here. We don't know what he's planning, but it's convenient without Kudou Retsu."

And at an already advanced age of ninety years old, he shouldn't be able to produce magic or have the stamina for it like before, but even so he was still a menace as he was well known before as the [world's most skillful]. His briefly shown skills a year back -- his continuously cast mental interference magic that enveloped the hall during the pre-competition festivities, and his insight that would *recognize* with only a look the electron silkworm hidden within a competition CAD -- would show that his [world's most skillful] title was no bygone title. When taking him on, he was an opponent not to be underestimated, not on open battle, but especially on attacking the weak points. No, he was a master even Tatsuya might fall

behind even if he was not being taken lightly. While Tatsuya didn't take the Kudou magicians lightly, he especially felt at ease without Retsu.

"Miyuki, I'm going."

Tatsuya, dressed in all black, said it to Miyuki. While he wanted a stealth suit or a mobile suit variant with stealth enhancing functions, Tatsuya knew he was asking for too much.

"Take care."

On hearing Tatsuya's voice, Miyuki stood up from the bed and answered that to him. Not saying "I'm coming with you" meant she knew her limits and was controlling herself.

Truth is her eyes were imploring him to let her come with him, but Tatsuya pretended he didn't notice that.

"Miyuki, remember that you're not supposed to stay in this room. Should you ever be exposed, just follow Chiyoda-senpai's lead at all costs and explain everything properly."

What Tatsuya said was neither lying, nor passing the buck. But his bluntness in instigating her to pass the burden to their upperclassmen was at this time so funny that Miyuki slipped out a smile.

Tatsuya was trying to investigate the course for the Steeplechase Cross-country. Of course, he thought that the P weapons -- Parasite dolls -- weren't already deployed.

He thought that if he could scout out the local terrain, he could guess where the traps were set and where the troops would lay an ambush.

However, Tatsuya could not slip into the course.

(With the security this heavy, why did they allow the No Head Dragons to slip in last year?)

As he observed the security systems that were so densely spread out not even an ant could go in, Tatsuya tut-tutted mentally. And he immediately found out his own fallacy.

(Well that happened last year...)

In the old days, regular troops letting crime syndicates invade their base would be facing the firing squad. And the base commanders would probably experience shame so bad death would be good for them. He was sure that the paranoid and strict security watch was a result of last year's incident.

He cautiously widened his *field of vision* to prevent detection by military magicians. Tatsuya's *eyesight* wasn't the kind that would alert the psion radars; he was probably concerned that he was under watch by ESPers who could sense his ability. Silently, as he usually would do to break off access, he penetrated the world with his perception.

At the edge of his widened field of vision, recognizable *existences* were spotted. What Tatsuya saw were not images, but information. Structural information of corporeal bodies was converted by the unconscious mind into signals the conscious mind could easily comprehend. Its coordinates in the physical dimension remained unchanged. Physically, they were closing in, yet information-wise they were still afar. It told him it was *her* high-level camouflage technique. I would expect no less from her, Tatsuya silently praised as he walked towards the *pair*. Halfway on, he called out towards the shadows in the night.

"Ayako, Fumiya."

There were signs of surprise at being suddenly apprehended. Immediately after, the surrounding shadows melded into solid bodies. With his eyes well attuned to darkness, Tatsuya recognized there the figures of a wide-eyed Ayako and a glad-looking Fumiya.

"Tatsuya-san, please don't startle us."

"I had no intentions of doing that."

"Then please don't call us out in such a scary voice."

Ayako's protests were mixed with reasonable seriousness. Her shortened breaths felt signs of relief, while her eyes seemed reflective, soaked a bit with tears.

Tatsuya didn't show any objections at Ayako's self-reproaching words. There were surely not in a battle, but his mental state might as well be in one. Even Tatsuya knew that he spoke too rough for comfort.

"So you're here to see the course?"

Even so he didn't apologize.

"...Yes. But the security is pretty tight."

"And we weren't able to get in."

What Ayako hesitated to say was filled in by Fumiya in her stead.

"You weren't able to get in even with Ayako's magic?"

Totally caught by surprise, Tatsuya let out the unspeakable question.

"Ah, no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to reproach you."

On seeing Ayako hang her head in shame, Tatsuya this time immediately apologized.

More than Tatsuya being surprised, it was understandable without asking much why Ayako was regretful.

Ayako had a forte -- the unique magic [Perfect Diffusion], aka [PD (Perfect Darkness)]. A magic that leveled out the target area's gaseous, fluid, and physical energy distributions to the point of non-detection.

Categorically [PD] belonged to convergence-type magic. Since it could be recorded into an activation sequence it means it was a normal magic. However, it was safe to say that ordinary magicians could only use [PD]'s weaker version [Diffusion] with difficulty. Tatsuya knew only Ayako could cast [PD].

For example, if sound is to be [leveled off], both voice and music will be totally leveled off into white noise where it's impossible to decode their meanings. However, the sound, in other words the generated sound itself, could not be hidden. This is still on the level of [Diffusion].

When a sound-deadening leveling-off zone has been spread out, the [Diffusion] magic finally becomes [PD]. Ayako's magic activation speed and interference strength were inferior compared to Miyuki's. However, she could spread out event interference zones larger than Miyuki's, and for this it was praised as the Yotsuba's greatest ability.

It's on dimly-lit outdoors at night where Ayako can fully unleash her specialty. She can selectively and instantaneously level off her own or her allies' reflection and emitted electromagnetic waves, melding into the darkness. By leveling off audio waves and air current variations, she can

evade auditory and olfactory detection. And so she assimilated them into the night. Her code-name [Yoru] was based on one character of her first name, and at the same time it designated her unique perfect diffusion magic.

"Did you also come here to check it out, Tatsuya-niisan?"

Fumiya raising that question was not meant to divert the conversation from Ayako. He was really thinking whether Tatsuya could do it when it was impossible for him and Ayako.

Tatsuya's [Decomposition] and Ayako's [PD] were similar in terms of event alteration. Decomposing materials into base elements, when viewed from a different aspect, is destroying material structure and scattering out the base elements into disarray. One can say Decomposition magic is [PD] with added depth and reduced scale.

And in truth, the one who made Ayako able to use her PD magic was Tatsuya when he was still under training at the Yotsuba main house. At that time Tatsuya was still in elementary, yet he had already mastered using Decomposition and *Self-Restoration* magics and was completing his combat training along with the adults. It was usual practice for a Kuroba magician to spar with him. And so Tatsuya showed to Ayako, at that time still at a loss over what her special ability was and undergoing magic training with one of her father's lackeys, an *easily comprehensible* demonstration of Decomposition.

He knew from his *Elemental Sight* that she possessed a similar magic special ability as his own. And so a still-young Tatsuya, intending to make her his own *comrade*, showed Ayako how to cast a [PD] which was based on [Decomposition].

Ayako's [PD] was similar to what Tatsuya had taught to her. And because of Tatsuya, it's no overstatement that she established her name, *Kuroba* Ayako, among the Yotsuba magicians.

Therefore Ayako never looked down on Tatsuya as a mere *Guardian*. And this was one of the reasons Fumiya adored him. At the same time, this became one of the causes for the Kuroba twins to *overestimate* him.

"Yes. But I too couldn't get in and was troubled by that."

Tatsuya's specialties were combat and assassinations. His skill in slipping behind enemy lines was almost top notch, but those were taught by Yakumo; inborn ability-wise he was no match for her. Whatever place Ayako couldn't get in should be a place Tatsuya cannot slip into without being detected either.

"I see..."

Fumiya muttered, his discouragement evident.

"Shall we try one more time? If Onii-san joins forces with us, it's possible."

And yet he was suggesting something positive --- even though the chances were nil.

"No, forcing our way in and making a fuss of ourselves would be the worst case scenario. I daresay we should quietly slip away for now."

"A wise action."

The answer to Tatsuya came neither from Fumiya nor from Ayako.

"Who's there!?"

A slender shadow floated up from the forests in answer to Ayako's sharp challenge.

"Master, would you please show yourself in a more mundane manner?"

The shadow, true to Tatsuya's sighs and grumbling, was Yakumo.

"It is as Tatsuya-kun said, it's best that we withdraw for tonight."

Without even answering Tatsuya's objections, Yakumo followed up on his own words.

"...Tatsuya-san, is that person...?"

Having realized Yakumo's identity, Ayako asked Tatsuya as she lowered her guard.

"Yeah, it is he you're thinking of, Ayako."

"Then he's *that* Yakumo-sensei."

This time it was Fumiya who strongly assented. For those two -- the next-generation bearers of the Kuroba, Yotsuba's intelligence branch -- the name Yakumo carried great significance.

"Well then, Master, did you find something?"

Yakumo shook his head at Tatsuya's inquiry.

"Nope. Nothing is laid down on the course."

"You were able to get into the course!?"

Ayako reflexively raised her voice, then slapped her mouth shut in panic. Calmed down by her childish gesture, Tatsuya faintly smiled. But then he quickly wiped it off and turned round on Yakumo.

"We gave up to the security systems, so what you did was masterful."

Tatsuya took a glance at Ayako's visage. As he expected, she was showing a bitter expression, but she had no signs of self-reproach.

"No no no, it's nothing much."

On the other hand, Yakumo felt triumphant with his unbroken pride. Fine for his age, Tatsuya thought, but that Yakumo might have done it deliberately to bring out Ayako's consciousness and send it my way, thought Tatsuya as he changed his mind.

"Well then, what's the situation inside? Although you did say there's nothing there."

If it was passive sensors then Ayako's magic could nullify them, no problem. The problem was the active sensors. Saying that Tatsuya wasn't bothered how by Yakumo managed to cheat all kinds of sensors there would be a lie. But it was clear that it was no use prying it from him. There was no way Yakumo would just simply show his hand. Besides, Tatsuya thought that the main objective must take priority.

"It is as you've said. For now only the *normal obstacles* were planted there as planned; it's a *normal* artificially forested training grounds."

"So you can't surmise where the Parasite Dolls will be planted."

"Can't do it. Nothing would change even if we knew where they will be planted. This is how it was constructed."

"So that means the Parasite Dolls are at least capable of independent and continuous operation in this terrain."

"That much says that they are created specifically for combat."

In the end, tonight's hotel sneak-out looked like a bust. Tatsuya gave thanks to Yakumo, bade goodnight to Fumiya and Ayako, and they returned to their respective hotels.

◊ ◊ ◊

It was a night when Tatsuya, the Kurobas, and Yakumo went on fools' errands; the situation nevertheless advanced without stopping. The situation may occur onsite, but at the same time the preparations were done at a different place.

Reveille came early and lights out came late for JSDF 101st brigade commander Maj. Gen. Saeki. A person having a lengthy staff officer duty imposed rashly by his superiors was laughable, but it was no laughing matter to her subordinates. The battalion staff would report up their favorite phrase [bringing back peace quickly is a general's job], but Saeki wasn't on the habit of replying back [the current situation is an emergency to a general]. Even today she was at the commander's room late at night, poring over summary reports from the battalion she dispatched to the 9SC.

Her preference of paper reports a result of her stressing confidentiality, she was reading unclassified reports over a modern display. On seeing the visi-phone's incoming call signal at its corner, Saeki scowled.

Her 101st brigade held no area of responsibility. It was unthinkable to get a call over the brigade commander's line from the JSDF HQ apart from emergencies like surprise attacks. Getting a call from the Defense Ministry was even more unthinkable. Just who the hell would make a phone call ...Suspicious, Saeki answered the call.

["Elder Saeki, pardon us for calling you at this unholy hour."]

Displayed on-screen was a gentleman even older than her. Saeki knew who that old man was.

"Hayama-san of the Yotsuba, right? It's been a while."

["Oh my, it's an honor for the most esteemed general, Elder Saeki, to remember a lowly servant like me."]

Saeki silently muttered ["What lowly servant?"] without change in her expression. What she knew of Hayama, needless to say, was his relationship to Tatsuya, whom the Independent Magic Battalion had taken under its wing. Should they *pull out* Tatsuya, Saeki would have consented to a direct negotiation, delegating to Kazama as her point man. In that case, the actual other negotiating party would be Hayama. Saeki meeting face to face with Maya would definitely be limited to an exchange of pleasantries. She was sure this old man would be the one to set up a negotiation between the Yotsuba and the 101st brigade.

["We disturbed you today at this hour to discuss something which we prefer to be kept between us. If it bothers you then we can set another date."]

While Saeki was committing her thoughts to memory, Hayama again asked her about convenient time. About to impulsively reject him, Saeki hastily stopped short of voicing it out.

"Let's hear it out."

["Thank you very much. Well then my mistress will take over."]

Before she could comprehend those words, Saeki gulped.

Respectfully bowing onscreen, Hayama's figure then disappeared.

["Good to see you, Elder Saeki."]

What was shown onscreen was a belle dressed in a deep crimson dress that could be mistaken for ebony. Those good looks remained virtually unchanged since three years and ten months ago.

"--- Yotsuba-san, it's been a long time since we last met."

An unexpected chill ran across Saeki's back. It was Yotsuba Maya, head of house Yotsuba. Saeki knew very well from her long career in intel analysis not only Maya's own power, but the power the [Yotsuba] possessed.

["I'm aware that Elder Saeki is busy at the moment, so I'll make my business brief."]

Not only was Maya's tone polite, it was also friendly. Her gentle smiling face, more youthful than her actual age suggested, had totally none of those dreadful impressions.

However, Saeki forced all the incoming information she saw and heard into data within her memories. Magic range and physical range had no direct relation. Whether magic will hit or not is not decided on physical ranges but on how far the information reaches. In truth, the last head of house Yotsuba and Maya's father, Yotsuba Genzou, showed himself on camera to transmit his trick and bring down opponents. And by just being connected in this video link, perhaps Yotsuba Maya could kill her. When she faced superiors and high officials, Saeki would come unfazed by favors and threats. But against someone who probably and literally held her life and death in the palm of their hand, she had no choice but to be very careful.

"--- What kind of business?"

["On the plot that Elder Saeki's brigade is about to get into."]

Saeki managing to get through this without a change of her expression was because of her steel nerves. But had she not braced herself in advance, she might have been shaking out of control.

["A charade of a terror plot was being planned at the National Magic Goodwill Magic Games Tournament, specifically at the stage for Steeplechase Cross-country."]

"... And you know its mastermind?"

And is it reliable? That question didn't came out from Saeki. Even if it wasn't Maya who said it, this was something not worth joking.

["The group with Col. Sakai of JSDF GHQ as the core, the so-called anti-Great Asia Alliance hardliners are the masterminds of this plot, or so the rumor goes."]

Maya lightly chuckled as she said that. What was said was nothing but a suggestion that the real mastermind was someone else, but Saeki nevertheless didn't inquire further. It was clear that asking wouldn't get her answers.

["And the role assigned to Your Excellency's brigade would be that plot's executors."]

"I have no intention of committing such skulduggery though."

To say that Saeki wasn't pissed would be a lie. She wasn't going to be so stupid that she'd jump into what was obviously a trap. And she believed her subordinates were not that stupid.

["We thought so too. And for that very reason we ask for your time."]

Maya was probably complimenting. But Saeki was in no thankful mood. Even if she was the world's strongest magician, Maya was over ten years younger than Saeki. Not to mention that plots like the one talked about now were Saeki's specialty. The information given was a godsend, but Maya's arrogant attitude stank to high heaven.

And most of all, she wouldn't stick out her neck for that. Saeki was too savvy for that.

"Well then, just what do you want to talk about?"

["They intend to drag my kin also into their plots."]

"... You mean Officer Ooguro, right?"

["An impressive insight. Based on that child's *disposition*, that's something unavoidable."]

The sigh that got out onscreen was seen not as a performance but as something for real. Saeki too thought that she and Maya were similar in opinion.

["It's just that we have no intentions of playing out what was assigned to us."]

"Should I put a stop to him?"

["No. Leaving that aside, the plot was so painstakingly prepared, I wonder if the hardliners *really* are the masterminds."]

Saeki stared hard at Maya's face onscreen. But even with her insight she couldn't pry out Maya's true intentions.

As always, it's not true that they didn't know anything. It was clear that for some reason the Yotsuba were eager to wreck Col. Sakai's group.

Even Saeki had felt scandalized for quite some time by the hardliners. True, if war broke out, they'd win against the Great Asian Alliance. However, the world wasn't only comprised of Japan and the GAA. Once she supported Kazama for the very same reason. The anti-GAA faction during the Great Indochina Wars and the anti-GAA faction that showed up today being considered as two sides of the same coin was an oversimplification. One must consider that military action is but one factor in multilateral diplomacy.

Saeki never thought that [the military must stay out of domestic and foreign affairs]. It was expected for them to follow orders, but she believed that until the orders were lifted there is no need for self-control. Even so, Saeki thought that Col. Sakai's faction deviated from what is acceptable for military personnel.

But this was strictly an internal affair for the JSDF. There should be neither necessity nor merit for the Yotsuba to purge them. Saeki knew well that they had no lust for power. She was one of the few top brass with a direct connection to the Yotsuba. The Yotsuba wielded their power that was based on their personal interests only for self-defense and retribution; that much Saeki was sure to affirm.

There must be a hidden influence behind the Yotsuba that wanted to wipe out the hardliners.

And she couldn't ask those questions in this very place, now.

["Because of that, we would ask for your cooperation."]

Way ahead of an inquiry, a request ended up right before her.

"You're asking me to ... unleash our weapons?"

["No, to tie up loose ends. It's because we cannot bear to show ourselves."]

Those were brazen words, even though it was spoken in a mild manner. It was because it was a request to a JSDF major general to go ransack within the JSDF and to do its cleanup.

"And what do I get in return?"

But Saeki kept her emotions shut; she was asking what she would gain.

Maya enigmatically smiled at Saeki's inquiry.

["The influence of the Ten Master Clans towards the JSDF would be diminished."]

What Maya said about the [Ten Master Clans] wasn't about all of the families; it was understood that it referred to Kudou Retsu himself.

Saeki shut her eyes to get away from Maya's smile. After contemplating, she nodded.

"Was that wise, Mistress?"

Hayama asked this to Maya after her negotiations with Saeki were completed.

"About what?"

Maya's answer was yet another question while she comprehended the question's aims.

If it wasn't Hayama he would have been shut down here and now. But such underhanded mouth-shutting tactic wouldn't work against the butler.

"Elder Kudou's hand still hasn't come out from the realm of speculation."

"And that's why I didn't bring up Sensei's name. And besides,"

After shamelessly boasting, Maya showed an evil smile.

"If that's the case then we have nothing concrete against the hardliners' farce terror plot."

Hayama, remaining expressionless, merely nodded.

"Perhaps those are false accusations. However, saying that much is unavoidable. After all, it was them that gave the order to purge the hardliners."

At the butler's words, Maya nodded with her evil smile from before.

"Indeed, we cannot go against our sponsor's intentions. If it weren't for this, we would have to resort to violent means."

Between them the mood was that of henchmen, rather than master and servant.

"If that's the case, even the secret maneuvers of the one called Zhou Gongjin would be convenient. Thinking for Tatsuya-dono's cover-up would be troubling though."

"A flashy show like last year would be worrisome. I wish he'd be at least more obedient *for six more months, until we greet the new year.*"

As Maya said those words, she pompously sighed.

"It's true that sparks come flying in Miyuki-san's way, but we can't tell him to cease his actions."

"Mistress, you think Elder Saeki will give her support to Tatsuya-dono?"

"It's all right, we cannot stop them. After all, we can only lend a hand. Only the JSDF has the courage to carelessly handle that child who has become the most unfortunate and worst magic weapon."

For we do not have the courage for that. Hayama thought he heard her mutter those unspeakable words.

◊ ◊ ◊

It was the afternoon following the eve of the party. Invited to have lunch with Honoka and Shizuku in their room – not in Tatsuya's room, but in Honoka's – Tatsuya, who along with Miyuki made four people returning to the hotel, heard the voice of a friend in the lobby crowded with students who had come to cheer on the competitors.

"Yahoo."

It was a situation eerily similar to last year, but this year the clothing was very docile. Specifically, Erika was sporting a sleeveless overshirt and three-quarters' length pants look as she waved her hand.

"So you're here to cheer us on."

"Naturally. Ah, two other people are coming."

As she was speaking, Leo walked up behind her.

"Hey, you, carry your own luggage yourself…. Tatsuya, what's up?"

In his hands he carried a bag, but amazingly enough, it seemed to be Erika's bag.

"Erika-chan, the key…ah, Tatsuya-san, Miyuki-san, Honoka-san, Shizuku-san, good afternoon."

Furthermore, from behind Leo, Mizuki appeared hauling a newscaster-looking travel bag.

"Lunch?"

"Not yet."

Tatsuya frankly asked and Erika concisely answered.

"Did you also call Mikihiko?"

For that number of people, a double room was cramped. Tatsuya and company moved toward the terrace seating of the café reserved for the Nine Schools' Competition teams.

Because it was already past the peak time, the eight people did not have to wait to secure seating. As they were settling down, Mikihiko suddenly asked a question.

"It seems that it was later than planned; did something happen?"

The one Mikihiko asked was Mizuki. However, in response to those words, the first to respond was Erika.

"Ehh…."

"Wh-what!"

In response to the sadistic smile that Erika turned toward him, Mikihiko backed away. However, that interaction was a mistake; it was too late.

"Since you heard about the plans from Mizuki."

"I received an email. That's all."

Mikihiko replied back hurriedly. On this occasion, though, the mask of impatience he wore had an adverse effect.

"Ehh? Miki, you exchanged email addresses with Mizuki?"

"We exchanged email addresses. Because we're friends."

At Mikihiko's brusque response, Erika turned her gaze toward Leo, who was sitting next to him.

"You, do you have Mizuki's email address?"

"No. Since it's not necessary."

In the present day, thanks to video chat, group chat has become widespread; therefore, in the case that one wanted to send a character-based communication, using group-only accessible message boards was typical. Email's superiority was in transmitting large amounts of data and the ability to send finely-targeted secret messages. – By the way, the fact is that Tatsuya knew Erika and Mizuki's email addresses, but Mikihiko had not been informed of that. Being made to misunderstand that knowing girls' addresses was akin to something to be ashamed about, Mikihiko's face turned completely red.

And as for Erika, by now her smile had spread over her whole face. Next to Mikihiko, Mizuki had a similarly red face and averted eyes. (In order to clear any misunderstandings, they were seated around two round tables they had placed together, the order being Erika, Mizuki, Mikihiko, Leo, Shizuku, Honoka, Tatsuya, Miyuki.)

Mikihiko, who could not bear the situation, finally exploded.

"What a misunderstanding you're making! I'm not the only one who received Shibata-san's email address. Miyuki-san and Mitsui-san and Kitayama-san got it as well!"

However, getting worked up only sunk him deeper and deeper into the quagmire.

"Tatsuya-kun?"

"Not me."

Mikihiko turned upon Tatsuya a look that said "Traitor", but such a false charge didn't perturb Tatsuya at all.

"By the way, Erika."

However, it wasn't because of Mikihiko, but rather because he could see that Mizuki's limit appeared to be approaching, that Tatsuya changed the subject.

"Is it really correct to say you were late?"

At Tatsuya's question, Erika frowned.

"Yeah, well."

For the land transportation system nowadays, which had resolved the issue of structural congestion, to have exceeded the arrival time by more than a measurement error, meant that along the way there must have been some trouble. Being unable to ignore trouble to that extent should have been an unpleasant thing. Erika's awareness turned away from Mikihiko.

"The bus encountered demonstrators at the entrance to the base."

Seeing this chance of release, Mizuki immediately spoke up.

"Demonstration?"

It seems the reason Honoka asked Mizuki was because the hotel was quite a distance from the base's entrance, so that they would not know even if a considerably loud racket occurred.

"Yeah, those…humanists."

Mizuki's response was for all present – only Tatsuya and company weren't at that place. Erika and Leo had also encountered that situation, and a fed up look came across their faces.

"It's always that, that."

Erika's voice was filled with undisguised ill-humor.

"The majority of magic high students are entering the army and making a mistake, wake up, the army's just using you – say those guys. Really, it's none of your business, after all."

While speaking, Erika gradually grew more excited and angry. In contrast to her, Leo's memories were also unpleasant, but he said nothing.

"Approximately what majority! What meaning is there in adding together high school graduates' university entrance rate and university graduates'

employment rate? Since that ratio was calculated from different populations, you can't add, subtract, multiply, or divide it, please understand at least that much!"

Though it was quite unpleasant, Erika was unusually logical. If her emotions were left to their own devices, they would go on indefinitely. Tatsuya reluctantly began the process of putting out the fires.

"For things like demonstrations and propaganda speeches, the necessary thing is not accuracy but impact. They too know that it's sophistry. Moreover, forty-five percent of magic university graduates have some connection with the national defense force before finding employment. That's certainly a considerably high rate, so claims like that can't be helped."

"What! Tatsuya-kun, are you on their side?"

"Me? Impossible."

Tatsuya's bitter smile had an "I, who've already joined the military?" meaning.

"That's so, isn't it? Sorry…."

Of course Erika understood that. That he had no other alternatives, Erika vaguely suspected.

"At any rate, Miki."

"My name is Mikihiko."

Mikihiko read Erika's intention behind daring him to bring back his former catch phrase as saying 'let's change the mood'.

"You, is it still 'Shibata-san'? Even though, since you call Miyuki 'Miyuki-san', it should also be fine to call Mizuki by her name."

"That's completely off topic!"

However, because of Erika, Mikihiko's solicitude was poorly returned.

Chapter 6

August 5th. The 2096 Nine Schools Competition was finally starting. Not only had the events changed this year, but various procedures had as well.

First for [Ice Pillars Break] and [Shield Down], there were three separate group preliminaries each involving nine contestants (or nine pairs) who competed three times (three sets), with the winners of each bracket coming together for the finals. [Rower and Gunner] would be decided by each pair making one run, with their score being based on number of targets hit and the amount of time taken.

The event with the least rule changes, [Mirage Bat], also had 27 contestants with three qualifiers from each school. The fixed four competitors per set had been changed to three rounds with four competitors and three rounds with five. Which set a competitor would go into would be decided by lottery. Usage of sustained flight was restricted to one minute bursts. This meant that competitors were required to land within one minute.

[Monolith Code] was changed from its irregular tournament format of qualifying league then finals to a round-robin league spanning two days. Using five stages four matches could be staged at a time, meaning a school's eight matches would take place over 10 rounds. [Monolith Code] competitors therefore compete in their eight matches on the 9th and 10th, then on the last day of the tournament compete in [Steeple Chase Cross Country] on the 11th. A heavy physical and mental burden was to be expected.

The first day featured the men's and women's qualifiers for [Ice Pillars Break], as well as [Rower and Gunner].

"If the competition times had overlapped, it would be quite problematic for you, Isori-senpai."

"It seems that's a needless worry now though."

Early in the morning inside the First High tent, Tatsuya coughed in relief. Isori answered with a smile. They were studying the game schedule for the day.

There were nine matches each of qualifiers for both men and women. This was half the number of last year, so each pair would only compete twice a day. The burden on players for this event had been greatly reduced.

While there had been two courts for both men and women up until last year, this year only one court was available to both. This meant that while the overall schedule density had not changed, a margin was freed up in each school's schedule.

Tatsuya breathed a sigh of relief after finding out that Eimi's race and Shizuku's bout would not overlap.

Tatsuya was responsible for Shizuku's CAD in [Ice Pillars Break], and Eimi's CAD in [Rower and Gunner]. He had been strongly solicited by both, but if Eimi's race and Shizuku's and Kanon's match had clashed, he would have had to leave Shizuku's and Kanon's follow-up to Isori.

Besides, both [Pillars Break] and [Rower Gun] (the contraction for Rower and Gunner) had very little for the technical staff to do during the event. The only events requiring CAD exchange and fine-tuning during the match were [Shield Break] with two rounds, and [Mirage Bat] over three periods. Therefore even leaving a pair to one technician was technically not an issue, but Tatsuya did not like the idea of leaving his responsibilities to someone else. If it had come to that, he would have been quite ashamed.

The match schedule had Eimi in the first race of the morning, and Shizuku in the fourth and seventh matches. There was no overlap.

"Then, I'll be going to the [Rower Gun] course."

"Good luck. With Shiba-kun, I'm sure there's no need for worry."

With a sunny smile that was wasted on guys, Isori saw Tatsuya off.

Next to the starting point were three doors provided for players and staff; Tatsuya entered the first one. There was nobody inside. That being said, there was still half an hour before the race began. The technical staff had to begin their work, but there was still time for the competitors.

"Good morning!"

Immediately after that thought came to mind, he was greeted by the spirited voice of Azusa.

"Morning, Shiba-kun!"

Faster than he could return the greeting, Eimi poked out from behind. Caught a bit on the back foot, Tatsuya nonetheless replied in order.

"Good morning, President. Eimi, you came together?"

'Together' referred to the third year student who had entered with her. Due to her quiet personality she simply bowed to Tatsuya, and Tatsuya for his part did likewise.

"Yeah, we had breakfast together. Did you have to wait?"

Eimi asked Tatsuya, although she didn't seem overly concerned.

It would only have troubled Tatsuya if she were, so he just shook his head normally.

"No, not at all."

"That's great!"

Clapping her hands together, Eimi grinned. Although it would have seemed sly by anyone else, it suited Eimi perfectly well.

"Then let's get the CAD adjustment started."

As Tatsuya spoke to Eimi,

"Let's go over there."

Azusa spoke to her player.

The results of that first day were Eimi's pair in first place, and the men's [Rower Gun] team in third. The Shizuku-Kanon pair qualified for the finals, with the men's [Ice Pillars Break] team also comfortably making it through.

"Eimi, nicely done. Your shooting was almost perfect."

"Thanks, Subaru. I was pretty shocked myself."

Similar bright voices swirled around at dinner, but there was no feeling of an easy win.

"Seventh High doing so well was unexpected."

The executives — Azusa, Hattori, Isori, Kanon, Tatsuya and Miyuki — were gathered in a corner in order not to disrupt the mood, and evaluated the results of the first day frankly.

"We got third for men's and first for women's. They got first for men's and second for women's."

At Azusa's words, Hattori glanced at the results for the day. Taking those into account, they were in second place. And the [Rower and Gunner] solo event tomorrow was the one First High had struggled the most with.

"They are truly [Seventh High of the Seas]. I don't think we lost out in terms of accuracy, but their proficiency was amazing."

As Isori spoke heavily, Hattori went on in a careful tone.

"If Seventh High claims first place in the solos tomorrow, it may be advantageous later."

"Because their point difference will be closer to Third High?"

"It's something I'm reluctant about myself."

Placing second in the men's and third in the women's division, Third High had earned 60 points. First High was ahead by 20 points. Although they had the lead, the prevailing thought was 'this won't last'. This was because they had no confidence whatsoever in the solos tomorrow.

".....Maybe it would have been best for Shiba-kun to be in charge of the [Rower Gun] solo after all? If it were him, whoever we send out would be able to win."

That sudden remark was from Kanon. Well, the theory was somewhat sound, but it was still pure recklessness to say the least.

A chilling pressure descended upon the executive gathering. Kanon reflexively went on the defensive, but Tatsuya suppressed Miyuki while Isori did the same for Kanon and a confrontation was avoided.

".....Changing engineers now is impossible. And even if it weren't, there's no guarantee that I could salvage the situation."

At the first point everyone — even Kanon — had to nod their head in agreement, but she seemed rather suspicious about the second. That was

because the victory of the women's pair today was clearly owed to the superlative accuracy and efficiency of their magic shooting.

"It was my feeling while watching today that the first trial round had a significant impact on performance. I'm sure having those pairs give advice would achieve the same effect."

Although that was certainly a sound argument, it was obvious that Tatsuya was changing the topic. However, no one protested this time.

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It was an open secret that Miyuki was staying in Tatsuya's room, the implications of which were varied and questionable. Because of that, he could no longer just camp in his room like he did last year.

Of course he couldn't stay in the cafeteria or lobby talking forever either. To make matters worse, the hotel was full, so the number of supporters from each school who could stay there was just 20. The rest had to be based outside. Lingering for too long would draw chilly looks.

The spot Tatsuya's group chose for their talk was beside the CAD adjustment work vehicle.

".....It somehow feels like a camp."

"Camping at a hotel?"

Honoka's impression was tsukkomi'd by Shizuku.

"That's why it's weird, don't you think?"

"You're right."

The exchange however ended somehow with Honoka's victory.

They were sitting in collapsible chairs for camping. Before them was a foldable camping table. Overhead an awning tent was stretched from the roof of a camper-van.

The work vehicle used by the technical staff of First High was a camper-van with an over-cab. Given that they only had a small wagon last

year, it was a remarkable improvement — almost a luxury. Indeed the students of other schools had been wide-eyed at First High's work vehicle.

One may have thought that the mastermind behind this ridiculousness was clear, but it was actually Miyuki. Last year she had been outraged her beloved brother had been forced to travel in such a piece of junk, and even one year later this dissatisfaction had not subsided — rather, she had forcefully pushed through a decision to improve the conditions for the technical staff. Miyuki had intended for FLT (in other words their father) to foot the bill, but in the end she had been unable to turn down the kindness of Shizuku's father.

Even while doing so, she had pressed for a seat on the bus for him to sit together with as well; Miyuki was rather selfish when it came to her brother. Well, in the end it had not been Tatsuya's transport environment which improved but that of the rest of the technical staff, so maybe she was actually being fair after all.

—Although, that had only been an afterthought.

"Here, coffee."

"Ah, thanks."

This conversation was not between Miyuki and Tatsuya. Although very reluctantly on Miyuki's part, it was Pixie who served coffee to Tatsuya. Not just Tatsuya, Pixie was handing out coffee to everyone.

"......Thank you."

"....."

Neither Miyuki nor Minami hid their displeasure. However Pixie was systematically integrated with the camper-van kitchen. There was nothing for the two of them to do here.

"Oh, thanks."

Kent thanked Pixie as naturally as if speaking to another human. He was Tatsuya's assistant this 9SC, having won his position admirably.

"Mizuki, Erika isn't actually unwell is she?"

Perhaps to distract herself from her mood, Miyuki questioned Mizuki on the matter they had heard earlier.

There were eight people here: Tatsuya, Miyuki, Honoka, Shizuku, Mikihiko, Mizuki, Minami, and Kent. Pixie, technically not a person, served as their waitress.

"No.....Eri-chan said she has something to take care of."

It was late at night, and there were few students still out and about. That being said, it wasn't just First High that had parked next to the wall for their technical staff to perform CAD adjustment; the engineers of other schools had been passing by and staring at the impromptu tea gathering for some time. By tomorrow this tea party would probably be known by the other contestants of First High. In that case, the number of participants would definitely go up for tomorrow night.

In fact Tatsuya and Miyuki were the only ones here who had not been called either directly or indirectly. The two had of course invited Leo and Erika as well. However, there was no sign of either of them.

"Leo said he would come....."

Mikihiko spoke as if apologizing. He had invited Leo over a voice communicator; he hadn't actually been in the same room with him. It thus couldn't be helped that he was unaware of Leo's movements, but Mikihiko was the sort of person who felt the need to apologize for that sort of thing.

"Um, about Saijou-senpai, I saw him on the way here."

Someone unexpectedly provided information. The one who spoke was Kent, smiling at Tatsuya (both Honoka and Miyuki sitting on either side of him tensed, although he remained facing forwards.) He had been working here since after dinner, so had rushed back to his room when it was tea time to take a shower.

"He was stopped by the Japanese branch director of Rozen."

"Rozen?"

Tatsuya's quizzical remark was due to the preliminary information heard from Mikihiko.

When he turned to glance at Mikihiko, Mikihiko returned the same questioning look.

"Yes, that man was without a doubt Ernst Rozen."

Tatsuya and Mikihiko's eye contact lasted for only a moment; Tatsuya's eyes were back on Kent immediately.

Kent appeared to be unaware of the exchange, and answered Tatsuya with a smile like a puppy running up, tail wagging.

"Saijou-senpai looked like he was quite troubled."

Immediately after Kent spoke,

"What about me?"

As if waiting for the right timing, Leo entered on cue.

Kent hadn't exactly been gossiping, but he was unable to escape the awkwardness of such banter about his senpai.

"He was talking about how he saw you in the lobby with Ernst Rozen."

Before that could manifest, Tatsuya stepped in to talk to Leo.

"Ah, ahhh.....well. That took a while. Sorry about that."

"It's not a problem. This isn't some formal gathering anyway."

As Kent had felt, it seemed Rozen's talk with Leo had not been pleasant.

Not prepared to pry any further than that, Tatsuya offered Leo a seat.

The tea party adjourned at 10pm. Mikihiko, Leo, and Kent (technically a man) escorted Shizuku, Honoka and Mizuki back. Miyuki and Minami remained, ostensibly to help clean up.

That Miyuki and Tatsuya were staying together in the same room was an open secret. That being said, Miyuki didn't have the courage to be seen going back to Tatsuya's room by Honoka and the others. She was not yet that bold. On Honoka's side, she likewise didn't want to see Miyuki and Tatsuya happily disappearing behind a door together. Miyuki was remaining there for both their sakes. —Minami's reason for staying behind actually was to clean up, her 'maid mission sense' being particularly high.

Minami's pride was fully satisfied. This was because Pixie had been called to work on Tatsuya's behest, and did not participate in the clean-up.

Pixie was sitting on a camping chair under Tatsuya's gaze. She had closed her eyes, and was blocking her ears with both hands. A 3H body received

audio input not only from the ears, and even if she closed her eyelids the optical sensors would still be capable of visualizing her surroundings. Cutting off external information could be accomplished just by shutting down the sensors anyway, so this was technically pointless behavior. The reason for Pixie undertaking such human actions was that she was exercising her non-mechanical senses.

"How is it? Can you detect anything?"

"I cannot sense any of my brethren."

Pixie answered Tatsuya, who was standing before her, with active telepathy. Immediately after the tea party ended, the Parasite infused within the female robot had been directed by Tatsuya to search for the Parasite Dolls.

According to the intel from the Kuroba, Parasite Dolls were essentially the same thing as Pixie. They were likely attempts by the Kudou, who knew of Pixie, to duplicate her. That was Tatsuya's thought anyway. Of course, their bodies were not for something like housework, they were no doubt made for battle. But considering their feminine rather than masculine forms, it was evident they had Pixie in mind.

The Parasites could sense their fellows. Not only those occupying a human host, but those in human hosts and those in mechanical hosts could sense each other as proven by the incident in February. Even if each party was now in mechanical hosts, the mutual detection should still hold true.

The reason Pixie couldn't sense the Parasite Dolls was because they were in a state they couldn't be traced, Tatsuya thought. There was no way the actual Parasites within the machines would be unable to sense each other. It was also not unthinkable that perhaps the Kudou had simply not brought the Parasite Dolls there yet.

(Perhaps they're dormant. Pretty cautious of them.....)

Tatsuya had heard from Pixie that an inactive individual was harder to sense. Were the Kudou engineers aware of that as well? What he had ascertained that night anyway was that searching for the Parasite Dolls storage location like this would be difficult, at least until they became active.

When Minami came to stand next to Tatsuya, the clean-up had all been completed. There was nothing more — nothing productive to be gained from continuing.

Tatsuya ordered Pixie to lock up the vehicle and enter a suspended state, before returning to the hotel with Miyuki and Minami.

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August 6th, the second day of the 9SC.

The summer morning dawned fast. Even so, the sky at the moment was dark, and had only begun to be tinged with blue. At that middling time, Miyuki was in a dim room sitting at the side of a bed. She was watching the sleeping face of her beloved brother.

No doubt many would have been surprised if they knew, but Tatsuya slept soundly. Miyuki had left the room dark, but turning on the lights wouldn't have woken him. Even someone in the same room making noise wouldn't have woken him.

As many would agree with, regardless of the depth of his sleep Tatsuya was a good riser. He would always reliably awake at the time he set for himself. There was no need for an alarm. His biological clock was very accurate. Furthermore, he would still react to any malice or ill-will when asleep. Even if someone sneaked up quieter than the sound of a needle falling, had they the intent to harm him or Miyuki he would immediately awaken. That being said, if someone came close enough even without any ill intent, Tatsuya's awareness would still open his eyes.

That boundary distance varied according to time and circumstance. Sometimes he wouldn't awake until close enough to breath on him; other times as soon as someone entered the room. Miyuki thought Tatsuya probably set the boundary himself before he went to sleep.

She guessed that the reason she could get so close was that Tatsuya had fallen asleep before he had setanything.

In this situation where they slept in the same room, the range wherein she would normally move about after waking up should have been set outside the boundary. Yet even after bringing a chair to sit beside him, he showed no signs of waking.

She was not confident about how much further she could get. If she moved closer by even just 10cm, he might wake up. Or she may be able to snuggle up beside him without him opening an eye.

Miyuki wanted to know.

How much closer could she get to her brother? What was a distance he would consider with her present?

(Just how far would Onii-sama allow me go.....)

Miyuki suddenly felt a chill. That thought beating within her, however, did not cool. Even in midsummer, the temperature before dawn was cold, and she was in nothing but a nightgown. If she remained as she was, naturally her body would cool down.

At this point Miyuki's awareness began to wander in a strange direction.

(I wonder if Onii-sama is cold?)

In fact, this was the first time Miyuki had spent a night together with Tatsuya in the same room. Last night — or rather the evening the day before yesterday — she had been so elated she'd simply dropped asleep at some point like a switch being thrown. She'd slept soundly until morning. From yesterday night to this morning, however, she'd been so acutely aware of Tatsuya sleeping next to her that she had awoken countless times. To top it off, even though it wasn't yet fully dawn, here she was at her brother's bedside almost like a stalker. The lack of sleep was beginning to melt Miyuki's self-control.

As if in a fever, Miyuki reached out to Tatsuya. Although it appeared to be a deliberate act, her consciousness was vague; the foremost thought once on her mind, 'he might wake up', no longer present.

Fortunately, Tatsuya did not open his eyes. His forehead was cool against her palm.

(Cold.....)

Thinking clearly why that was so — Tatsuya's body avoided useless metabolism and was cooler to begin with, while Miyuki's temperature was higher due to the lack of sleep. Miyuki's thinking however—

(Oh no.....I have to warm him)

—had already short-circuited.

(Umm, skin contact is better for situations like these.....was it?)

That was more something for times of emergency. Such a thought, which had her head been functioning properly would no doubt have caused her to overheat, had at some point been fixed under the pretext of 'nursing' in Miyuki's mind.

(.....I guess stripping is no good after all.....)

It seemed a modicum of shame was left to her yet. Completely forgetting about waking him, Miyuki gently snuggled up next to Tatsuya.

(Onii-sama, let Miyuki warm you.....)

Already on the border between wakefulness and sleep, Miyuki descended into dreamland while holding on to Tatsuya.

Confirming that Miyuki's breathing had evened out, Tatsuya opened his closed eyes.

(She's finally asleep.....)

Gently lifting Miyuki's arm off his chest, Tatsuya slipped out of bed. He had actually been awake when Miyuki stretched out her arm towards him. However, his sister had been in some strange mood (he could tell even without looking), so he had ascertained her condition while pretending to be asleep.

<<Fortunately**>>**, he was not overcome by sexual desire even with such a peerless beauty sharing the same bed with him. That did not mean he had not felt anything at all however, and when he thought of sleeping together with his similarly aged sister he couldn't help but feel embarrassed. The pleasant sensation of Miyuki's soft body increased the embarrassment several times over. He could no longer sleep any further.

That being said, his sister was competing today, and he couldn't wake her. Tatsuya didn't know just when Miyuki had woken up, but there was at least time to sleep a little longer.

Tatsuya dressed roughly without making a sound. Stroking Miyuki's hair and thinking 'sleep well', Tatsuya breathed in the early morning air and quietly left the room.

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"Good morning."

"Ah, good morning ... ... ?"

Azusa had tilted her neck as she replied back to Tatsuya and Miyuki, who had entered the HQ tent bringing in breakfast sandwiches. And for this, the greeting ended up unfinished.

Miyuki, always trailing behind Tatsuya, looked strangely, no, very embarrassed. From Azusa's view the distance between them was a bit -- basically about 30 cm -- further apart than usual. And Miyuki's eyes were a bit red at the corners and were slightly directed downwards.

Today, Miyuki would play in the preliminaries for [Ice Pillars Break] solo category. The tactics of First High, aiming for the overall championships, called for grabbing the championship in the Girls' [Ice Pillars Break]. Computing the events where the maximum number of points was obtainable, and avert crashing out of preliminaries even if the worst were to happen -- that was what the prudent Azusa was thinking. In Miyuki's case, they couldn't foresee her losing this event, but now she was giving off a tinge of anxiety.

"What happened?"

Azusa was asking that because she couldn't shake off that vague feeling of worry.

"What, you ask?"

Asked in return with a forced tone by Tatsuya, she was shut out from asking any more questions.

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Results-wise, Miyuki stormed past the preliminaries with a wide lead. Things got a little scary for the boys, but they safely advanced past preliminaries. And as First High executives had dreaded, both boys and girls ended in an ignominious fourth in [Rower and Gunner] solos, gaining no points.

As for the other schools, Seventh High won both boys and girls with 100pts; with 200pts total, they were on the forefront for the 2nd straight day. Third High got 2nd place at both; with 120pts total, they'd slipped past First High for 2nd place overall. Considering the events from tomorrow onward, they could quickly upset Seventh High -- that was what Third High should have been thinking. It should have been a good start for Third High.

However, the dinner scene at Third High was definitely not totally joyous. The second years gathered in a corner were suffused with a heavy atmosphere. The source of their dark clouds was the [Rower and Gunner]'s solo player Kichijouji, who was unable to grab the championship.

"Kichijouji, even 2nd place isn't that bad. Don't let it weigh you down."

"Yeah. I was 2nd place once, but I paid no heed to that."

There were even third years, having finished eating and heading for trailer clean-up, cheering him up as they passed by with not much visible effect.

"Who could have seen that Seventh High would pull something like that off.....?"

Until then he had been at ease, but the unexpectedly frustrating grumble escaped from Kichijouji's silent mutterings. If it weren't for the tableware before him, he would have been falling forward.

He was shocked not because he was defeated that easily, but because of how he was defeated. For someone like Kichijouji, who relied on ingenuity, tactical defeats were an even bigger blow than ability defeats. And he felt today's defeat was not due to ability, but tactics.

"No use griping about it."

Those were easy-to-say words, more comforting for all the complaints and grumblings than just falling into dead silence. The second years surrounding Kichijouji were saying this to him at the critical moment.

"That's right, using the rules to abandon all shooting is unorthodox."

Seventh High's tactic was simple and unexpected -- targets hit by mechanical spray-firing were a bonus, and so their magic power was diverted into board control, intent on shortening the time. Rower and Gunner rules stipulated that the fastest team's time be divided by the number of hits from the team with the most hits to calculate the time per hit. This value was multiplied by the hit count and the resulting product was subtracted from the running time to get the time difference. The team with the smallest time difference would then be chosen as the champion. This meant if the time difference was small the team with the most hits had the advantage; conversely, if there was no big difference in the hit count, the team with the fastest time had the advantage.

Incidentally for the Boy's solo event, Third High's Kichijouji had the most hits. This meant that from the results of precision firing and spray-firing, the time difference was too big. A result where brute-forcing won over seeking accuracy was something Kichijouji couldn't comprehend.

"For the pair event, all teams focused on their hit counts."

"In truth, that was where First High's girls trumped over Seventh High."

"Seventh High might have been blessed with an unexpectedly lucky shot. It has happened before in competitions. Don't you think so, Masaki?"

The second year boys, in search for a consensus, brought the story to Masaki.

There, all who were consoling Kichijouji, noticed something strange.

Looking back, up to now Masaki hadn't said even one comforting word to Kichijouji. On the contrary, he hadn't said a thing since dinner had started. He'd been eating all right, but he gave the impression that his mind was focused on a totally different matter.

"Masaki?"

"Hm? True, the strongest doesn't always win, but today's victory will affect Seventh High negatively. First High might have lost to them, but they'll catch up. Looking at it objectively, I believe it's far from bad. It was within their calculations."

It seemed he'd been following them, but for some reason the unnatural feeling couldn't be shaken off. Both male and female classmates surrounding Kichijouji, in spite of gender, looked at each other.

"I see ... you're right. First High will catch up."

"Our final objective is the overall championship. We have our work cut out for us starting tomorrow."

"Dwelling on today's results is not the best action, you said? I understand, Masaki."

However, it seemed that Kichijouji got over his shock due to Masaki's words. On that note the dinner was concluded, and no one bothered asking about Masaki's unnatural behavior.

Today's night tea party was scheduled because at the start various work, including CAD tuning, was coming to an end. Tomorrow morning would be [Shield Down] for the Boy's pair, and the afternoon would be the finals for [Ice Pillars Break] for the Girl's pair.

Even though he was in charge of Shizuku, who charged past preliminaries, he was serving as engineer for Kirihara, of the Kirihara and Tomitsuka pair. What was more, the day after tomorrow he was taking care of Miyuki's [Ice Pillars Break] Girl's solo in the morning and Sawaki's [Shield Down] Boy's solo in the afternoon. This was expected to be the busiest two days *especially for Tatsuya at the 9SC*.

"Shiba-senpai, voltage checks for Kirihara's CAD have been completed."

"Hook them up to the auto-debugger next."

"Okay."

With Kent as his assistant, Shizuku's and Kirihara's CADs were tuned. This work had strong tinges of inspection rather than tuning, so making Kent the assistant had strong educational impact in guiding him in "orthodox" CAD tuning protocols. However, Kent was unexpectedly skilled and knowledgeable, and he was turning into a capable help for Tatsuya.

Just as the pair's work appeared to be ending soon, a visitor came for Tatsuya.

"It's you, Ichijou. What's up?"

Coming to visit the operations van was Masaki.

"Sorry to visit you at this hour. Do you have a moment?"

"We're running on schedule. If it's just for a moment, then it's fine. Kent, I'm taking a break."

"Okay, senpai."

Tatsuya called out to Kent with this, then went along with Masaki to a spot unlit by the van's headlights.

"You're entrusting the engineering work to a freshman?"

Masaki, walking alongside and a bit surprised, asked him that.

"I was once a freshman last year."

However, on hearing Tatsuya's slightly sarcastic answer, Masaki bitterly smiled, thinking "That's way too rude."

"Well then, I believe you've come to me only for the Steeplechase case."

Ignoring Masaki's relatively friendly façade, Tatsuya went ahead and spilled out what the former would say. Masaki instantly hardened his expression, then changed his mind figuring this was no time for idle chat.

"Yeah, it's as you've said. Somehow, it's more suspicious than I thought."

"What did you find out?"

Tatsuya stopped walking and turned towards Masaki. The latter directly took on the former's inquiry.

"It's still far from the point where you can say that I've found them out. It's just that the JSDF hard-liners appear to be involved with it."

"Hard-liners?"

Tatsuya inquisitively asked back; Masaki immediately found out that Tatsuya didn't know what [hard-liners] was simply referring to.

"Oh, sorry, it's the anti-GAA hard-liners within the JSDF."

"And they are the ones maneuvering behind the 9SC?"

With a little thinking, it was an easy-to-understand plan. The powers that desired a war victory were in a hurry to expand their battle strength by selecting combat-capable magicians. High school students may not be ready fire-power, but even the hard-liners wouldn't be wishing for a war outbreak in a day or two. Besides, if they were to see results in the 9SC, it would be easy to guess that this method would be expanded into the university magicians' athletic meets.

However, house Kudou, no, Kudou Retsu and the hard-liners joining together -- to consider it would be a troublesome combination. Tatsuya had heard that Kudou Retsu hated to see magicians used as weapons. It was all rumors, but it had high credibility. Just hearing it from Fujibayashi could be for the benefit of her relatives; such was worth considering, but Kazama, critical of the Ten Master Clans organization, would say pretty much the same thing.

Retsu hated the use of magicians as weapons, and yet he was not denying the use of them as soldiers. Paradoxical, yet that was the very reason there was no way for that old man to use high school students as guinea pigs for such a foul-looking method. For soldiers are not expendable, but are important resources.

"I heard Col. Sakai wants us high school students to join up the JSDF, bypassing the Ministry of Defense in the process."

With Masaki continuing to explain, Tatsuya sensed he was getting more and more confused. I see, if the hardliners' objective is to secure volunteers as ready firepower then confrontations against Kudou Retsu cannot occur. If they are to introduce strong combat-type events, then their plan is crystal clear. Perhaps they'd try to instill to the high school students the exhilarating feelings when battle instincts and destructive urges were unleashed. If that's the case, it's no different from trying to increase the number of youth that aim to join as combat magicians.

Even himself as among the youth --- on the contrary, in spite of not being on a youth's level, Tatsuya thought of it as someone else's problem. Motivating for combat instincts and destructive urges was a MO even used in Yotsuba training.

Nevertheless, that did not explain the spell to make parasite dolls go on a rampage. The hardliners had to know how much, how far the connections went. Either they were tied to the puppet master or they were mere minor actors.

And then a small problem suddenly popped up within Tatsuya's mind.

"... You got as far as finding out Col. Sakai's name."

Even the Ichijous probably had a channel of their own into the JSDF. But it should have been no easy task to thoroughly check out the ringleader's name in a short time. Since it was no public political party, there were no written registries going around about each faction.

Masaki showed a bitter expression at Tatsuya's monologue on abrupt question.

"Col. Sakai was my father's old acquaintance..."

As expected, even Tatsuya was astounded by this *acknowledgement*.

"Ichijou, I didn't expect that..."

"No, that's way off! Don't take it for something else, Shiba!"

As expected, Ichijou openly denied the confusion even when going as far as suggestively taking a stab at it. Even Tatsuya felt relief for the denial. Better that the enemies keep on increasing; if this situation deteriorates any further, he would turn the tables over with bothersome brute force.

(No ... ... I'd rather end up destroying the steeplechase course. Doesn't matter what kind of action I have to take if I do that.)

"That they were acquaintances was a matter for the past."

Masaki was flustered over something else, totally unaware that Tatsuya was thinking of something far more dangerous.

"Col. Sakai was the top commander in that area during the Sado invasions four years ago."

(From the start I have nothing to do with the Kudou's objectives or with the JSDF predictions.)

"Perhaps you knew about it, but a volunteer force with my father as the leader was formed to recover Sado. At the same time father appealed to Col. Sakai for whether a regiment-sized unit can be dispatched to Niigata, Hokuriku. That time both the gov't and the JSDF were focused on Okinawa, so the JSDF had intended to send in a battalion once the volunteer army had recovered Sado."

(Having First High win the 9SC is optional. Or at least on the last day's Steeplechase, Miyuki or Honoka or Shizuku's championships will wait until after this is over. A premature 9SC termination would be a complete humiliation for the Magic Association well into the thesis competition --- but that's out of my hands.)

"Col. Sakai answered my father's appeals. We're thankful for that even now. At that time a large military force had been virtually thrown our way. We haven't seen an offensive that big, as my father would say, and I believe so, too."

(If I hit the ground just below the surface with a Material Burst it would probably be misidentified as explosions from conventional weapons. Targeting for an infinitesimal mass is possible with a *self-made* Third Eye

and a *short distance of a few kilometers* and shouldn't trigger any volcanic ranges. Doing it at the dead of night won't cause any harm to all students. That leaves persuading Miyuki and to whom to pin this action on ... I think.)

"However, just after the first part of the Okinawa battle, the colonel tried to pull a counter-invasion on the New Soviet Union! My father protested, but the colonel would hear none of it. Of course, there's no way the GHQ would approve such a venture. As a result the counter-invasion didn't happen, but father was at loggerheads with the colonel until the regiment stood down. From there they quarreled and split up, and they haven't spoken to each other since."

(If only there were criminal syndicate members prowling about just like last year to be able to pin this on them. Don't they have the latent strength to go against the armed forces?)

"I talked to my father yesterday and he was troubled, saying 'it's better off without that mutiny nonsense', but then he said, 'it's already other people's problem so we can do nothing about it' as he shook his head with finality."

"Mutiny, you said?"

Tatsuya thought it was totally different from Masaki's *explanation* thus far. However the single word that would match with his thoughts came flying through his hearing, spontaneously focusing his consciousness onto Masaki's story.

For Masaki, Tatsuya suddenly giving out a response after silently listening to his explanation (that's what he saw) was a surprise, and he learned that the word [mutiny] was extreme for a new irritant.

"No, there's no such thing as suspicions of mutiny against Col. Sakai's group. I myself know little of the details, only the [it's only a matter of time for a mutiny to occur] kind of rumors."

"That means you don't have any proof."

"Y, yeah."

"Only rumors then."

"That's probably the case ... anyway!"

Masaki must have felt this conversation was going in a direction he himself didn't like. He raised his voice to force the conversation back on track.

"Right now the Ichijous have nothing to do with Col. Sakai. We did some socializing back then so we have many connections; it was through these connections that we're aware of this case. Col. Sakai's group probably isn't planning on a mutiny. If they are plotting on something, I believe it's to gather a considerable number of young magicians and take them into their own faction, then take the battle to the GAA's shores."

"That much is enough for a not-so-quiet conversation, ... but thank you. I'll keep those in mind."

"I, it's nothing much. I'm investigating for my own sake, no thanks are necessary. Anyway that's as the situation goes so maybe no one's making a move on the matches. They might when the tournaments are over. I'll contact you when I find something ... whether during the closing party, or by discreetly contacting you."

"Thanks."

Tatsuya sent off Masaki, who was taking his leave very hurriedly, with a terse thanks. He knew Masaki's conjectures were off, and he didn't intend to drag the latter into the Parasite Dolls matter.

(Hardliners.....)

Offered with a definite candidate for a possible scapegoat, Tatsuya instead regained his composure. There was clearly no time even if diversionary tactics were executed. It was less than ten days until match day for Steeplechase Cross-country, where the parasite doll experiments would be performed. To complete an operation with such a short time interval would be difficult even with Yakumo's help. It might be possible with Yotsuba help, but it was highly unlikely that Maya would give her support to the partial explosion at Fuji training grounds from the onset.

(It's so unlike me to be too indecisive over this or that...)

With that, Tatsuya finally recognized that he was wearing out. For now, tonight, Tatsuya ordered himself to drive out the Parasite Doll matter from his mind and relax in a tea session with his younger sister and friends.

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Day three of the 9SC. In the morning the prelims and finals for Shield Down, boys pair, and the finals for Ice pillars break, boys pair, were carried out.

And currently they were in the midst of the third finals match for Shield Down, boys pair. Both First and Third High were tied for first in the finals, so the winner of this match would be the champion of Shield Down boys pair.

Tomitsuka hoisted up his shield, then charged on. The Third High players, aware from the matches thus far that the First High pair were both close-range types, always kept their distance from both Kirihara and Tomitsuka as they fought on. However, the immediately effective remote magic was a high-strength area interference instead of the narrow one created by Tomitsuka -- that's what the Third High players believed. The truth was they were kept out because of contact-type Gram Demolition. In that situation the Third High players lobbed compressed air masses at them.

"Yaaah!"

The shockwave unleashed from Tomitsuka's shield blew up the compressed air masses into mere "quite strong" winds. It was a composite of Movement-type magic [Rest] and a derivative of acceleration magic [Explosion]. It was not the application of radial acceleration to solid masses, but an alteration where the gases directly in contact with the shield face were given acceleration vectors that were perpendicular to the shield face ([Rest] here was meant to restrain against its backlash).

Until 9SC training had started, Tomitsuka was unable to learn the air-based attack magic that was popular among Modern Magic users. This magic type mostly required continuous state maintenance of the compressed air until it rushed towards or touched an opponent. For Tomitsuka, unable to control magic beyond the range of his limbs, there was no getting around the fact that there were things he knew he was not good at.

However, being 'totally' unable to learn this type of magic was really a problem of the 'consciousness'. As long as one was on solid ground, air was everywhere. It existed 'where it is within one's reach'. By only accelerating the air close at hand, long-range control was unnecessary. An example would be Sawaki's Mach Punch, where it was just a mass of

solidified air surrounding the fist pushing out the air in contact with said mass. A spell to accelerate part of a body, no, the entire body into sonic speeds after moving solidified air through sonic speeds without any time lag was a tough proposition, but the remote control for the 'process' of firing out a shockwave wouldn't be used at all.

Tatsuya, serving in a double role as tactical officer, drew up the basic theoretical framework. But, it was through Hirakawa Chiaki's efforts that an activation sequence for [Blast] that Tomitsuka could master was devised and its CAD optimized.

Chiaki was by nature more proficient in CAD hardware than in software-based activation sequences; she too was proficient in adjusting activation sequences, but she was bad at arranging them. But after hearing from Tomitsuka the concepts behind [Zero Range Blast], Chiaki, under Professor Jennifer Smith's daily guidance, grappled with her weakness that was activation sequence arranging, before she succeeded in a rearranged activation sequence for Blast that Tomitsuka could easily handle. One could say that thanks to Chiaki, a zero-ranged Tomitsuka could use Blast.

Kirihara, taking his cue from Tomitsuka blowing away Third High's attacks, rushed forward. For the ring positions, Tomitsuka was in the middle, the Third High pair were on the edge, and Kirihara was smack between them.

He then lowered his body, kneeling down on one knee as if going down, then struck the ring with his shield.

A beat later the ring shook. Along with the counter vibration due to the ring being struck, magic to create frequency-controlling vibratory waves was fed in.

The shaking was great in the center. However, it had a big psychological impact on the Third High pair, who were standing on the edge. Should they fall out of the ring, they would be eliminated.

Their consciousness focused on their footing, they veered away from Kirihara and Tomitsuka.

The pair didn't let that opening slip through. Using self-acceleration magic, Tomitsuka rushed forward and past Kirihara, ramming one Third High player with his shield. This time it was his specialty, an Explosion that affected solid bodies.

The other Third High player had no time to realize that his partner had fallen out of the ring as Kirihara had stabbed into that player's shield with his Shield Edge.

It was a variant of Sonic Blade. The Third High's shield did not break, it was shattered. And without going for round two, the Shield Down boys pair championship went to First High.

Kirihara took Tomitsuka's hand and raised them up high. At the ringside staff chairs, Chiaki was clapping her hands with joy. She had an always sour look due to Tatsuya sitting beside her, but it appeared even that was forgotten.

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On the third day First High took third for men's Ice Pillars Break pairs, and first for the women's. The men's Shield Down pair took first, but the women's pair dropped out in the prelims. This was an unexpected result, but they had been grouped with Third High who ended up winning overall. If they had beaten Third High at that match they likely could have ended up winning themselves; so intense was the fight.

But what's done is done. Third High placed no lower than second for all their events today. The point gap which had been 40 at the end of the second day was now 100. At the dinner table, even the pairs who had won were in a sombre mood.

Instead--

"Shizuku, congratulations on your win!"

"Well, with Shizuku's abilities that was a given."

"Yep yep, congrats Shizuku!"

At the evening tea party at Tatsuya's work vehicle, words of praise to Shizuku flew fast.

"Thanks, everyone."

No matter how many times, it was still something to be happy for. Shizuku lightly inclined her head.

"Tomorrow is Miyuki's turn, huh?"

Slightly abashed, but covering it magnificently as always, she turned the focus to Miyuki.

"Yes, I'll have to do my best, too."

Without jesting or subtlety, Miyuki replied with a determined smile.

"I think it'd be best if you didn't think like that. If you focus all your effort into that you might make a pitfall when you least expect it."

"There's no way any sort of trap could defeat Miyuki, right? Rather, I think the most important thing is to take care not to make a false start."

"That's the biggest pitfall."

"Jeez.....Subaru, Erika, do you really think I would be that careless?"

The reason Subaru and Erika had framed their concerns as jokes was because they couldn't take the pure atmosphere radiating between Shizuku and Miyuki. With Miyuki's light protest, the air in the group relaxed again.

"No, it's not that."

Subaru answered with a wry smile, and Miyuki likewise pursued no further.

The breezy chatter of the girls melted into the night sky. The number of people attending the parties had increased steadily and things were becoming livelier.

Erika hadn't come the first day, saying she was 'busy', but had joined since last night as if there were no more problems. Tonight, Satomi Subaru and Akechi Eimi had also come along. The camping table would be full soon. If even more people came, they'd have to find another table and chairs. --All the second year girls were here now, however, so it was probably unlikely any more would turn up.

The first tea party was known to all of the First High team by the next morning. The reason Eimi and Subaru had joined tonight wasn't because they were reserved about staying the night.

"That said Eimi, it's good you're feeling better. Spending a night like that wouldn't have been very nice."

"I, I wasn't sulking! Not at all!"

It wasn't like she had pressed the issue because she thought it was that big a deal.....but seeing Eimi frantically refute it, Subaru heaved a sigh. Based on her attitude, it was questionable if she was really calm, but Subaru had been able to feel that Eimi was troubled.

Subaru and Eimi shared a room. They weren't as close to Tatsuya's group as Honoka and Shizuku and since coming to the 9SC, outside of matches, they mainly spent their time together. So when Subaru felt that something was bothering Eimi, she herself would feel affected and as a friend, would feel the need to do something.

"What happened?"

Miyuki questioned not Eimi herself, but rather Subaru.

"Nothing at all!"

Her facing reddening, Eimi tried to interfere. But something like that wasn't able to stop Subaru.

"It's about Tomitsuka....."

At that answer which Subaru gave with one eye closed and a shrug, Miyuki, Honoka and Shizuku all breathed out with expressions of understanding.

"What did Tomitsuka-kun do?"

Mizuki turned to question Shizuku, who sat next to her. It was Erika who answered, however.

"He was probably flirting with that chick."

"That chick.....?"

"Hirakawa. Hirakawa Chiaki."

It seemed Mizuki finally understood what Erika was driving at. Still looking unconvinced, however, they turned to Eimi.

"Eimi. It's Tomitsuka-kun, I'm sure he was just expressing his gratitude."

Talking about how Tomitsuka and Chiaki had been getting along well during dinner(although Chiaki had her head down most of the time), Honoka spoke words of comfort to Eimi.

"I said there was no problem."

Eimi persisted in her denial, but it hadn't been only Honoka who had seen Tomitsuka with Chiaki. Shizuku and Miyuki had seen the same thing. Even if they hadn't, it was evident with a glance by comparing Subaru and Eimi's expressions who was more trustworthy here.

"Eimi, Tomitsuka-kun is hopeless."

"What was that?!"

Displaying such a predictable reaction, it was questionable whether she was really holding something back. That said though, Shizuku's words had been fairly confrontational--to put it lightly.

"Unlike Tatsuya-san, Tomitsuka-kun is honest-to-god dense. You'd have to clearly spell things out to him."

After Shizuku elaborated, Eimi was left with a delicate expression. It appeared she wouldn't go to his defense--or rather, it was a face which conceded there was no defense.

Speaking of delicacy, Tatsuya seemed lost as to what sort of expression to make. Perhaps mercifully, his troubles didn't last long.

[Master.]

Being telepathically called by Pixie all of a sudden, Tatsuya suppressed his tension and stood up with a neutral expression. He had forbidden Pixie to use telepathy except in one specific scenario. In other words, that situation had occurred.

"Onii-sama?"

"Tatsuya-san?"

"Something sounds off. I'm going to go have a look."

Leaving Miyuki and Honoka that excuse which could be rather openly interpreted, Tatsuya headed inside the vehicle.

Once inside, Pixie led him over to the map located on the panel at the driver's seat. In the center of the map the SCCC course was laid out, adjoining the military road opposite them.

[I have caught readings of my compatriots in this location.]

"Are the signals still ongoing?"

Scrutinizing the map with a pained expression, Tatsuya contacted Pixie.

[It is. It seems my presence has likewise been compromised.]

"How many?"

[I can identify 16.]

That number coincided with what Tatsuya had gleaned from the former Ninth Institute lab.

[Ah.....]

Pixie voiced her feelings reflexively. This sort of personal behavior had become increasingly common lately.

"What is it."

[I have suddenly lost all contact. I believe they may have gone dormant.]

"Any signs of movement?"

[From what I had intercepted, negative.]

At this stage the Parasite Dolls were yet unable to be developed in military facilities. Tatsuya did not know just how much they had been informed, but this Parasite Doll performance test was most likely a secret. If that was the case, Tatsuya believed it was likely they had been brought in via a mobile lab of some sort.

Tatsuya likewise didn't know the effective distance it would have to be in to effectively monitor the Parasite Dolls. But for the sake of a performance test, he deduced that they wouldn't want to be too far when the competition was under way. A position close to the course should therefore be the logical choice. The only problem was--

(If we could determine the location of the Parasite Dolls from here, they likely know the position of Pixie as well.....)

That point caused him considerable concern. If Pixie could recognise the Parasite Dolls, the reverse also likely held true. Meaning the fact that the

presence of the Parasite Dolls had been compromised was a fact also known to the Kudou experiment team.

If Tatsuya was in their shoes, he would have moved out immediately. That meant finding a different position until the day of the experiment. However, these people were complacently operating under the aegis of Kudou Retsu's protection, and there was a good chance they wouldn't be that wary.

(.....Didn't I just decide yesterday that there was nothing to be gained from wondering here. It's not like there's much to lose. Let's go have a look.)

Tatsuya finally decided upon that course of action.

By the time he had collected his equipment and headed back outside, the tea party was already wrapping up.

"Tatsuya-san, see you tomorrow."

"See you, too, Miyuki."

"Tatsuya-kun, thanks for the party."

"Shiba-kun, Miyuki, thanks again~"

"See ya, Tatsuya."

"Shiba-senpai, good night."

The lively group of friends (+ one junior) returned to the hotel. Having seen them off, Miyuki cheekily smiled up at Tatsuya.

"Onii-sama, are you heading out?"

"Yeah."

She knew him so well that there was no point trying to hide anything as he nodded.

"I thought as much, so I got everyone to head back early."

He had been seen through to a frightening degree, but thinking 'this isn't new', his disturbance faded before it ever surfaced. Her next words, however, did affect him.

"Onii-sama, please don't go."

"Miyuki.....what do you mean?"

"No. Rather, Onii-sama. I won't let you go."

There was no longer any trace of amusement in her eyes. Rather, they glinted with an unshakeable will.

"Onii-sama, must you really go confront the enemy now? I personally don't think so."

"Pixie has detected the enemy's location. We finally have a lead."

"Before that. What I'm asking is, why must Onii-sama move to intervene with the experiment of the Kudou."

It was one of those rare moments Tatsuya was lost for words. From the moment he had received the message from the unknown sender, he had taken that they must be stopped as a given. However, that was only something *he* had thought.

"This may be selfish of me. I haven't exactly assisted you in this case either, so this may be rather shameless of me as well."

As she spoke, Miyuki was resolute. Whilst bearing her 'shame', she continued to stand before him.

"You may scold me as much as you like later. But Onii-sama. Before that, please hear me out."

Tatsuya's eyes never wavered from Miyuki's. After declaring he had intended to go face the enemy, he had not moved an inch from before her.

"There is not a single reason why Onii-sama should have to bear responsibility for the Kudou's plans. Onii-sama does not have any obligation to stop the Parasite Dolls at all."

Tatsuya himself knew that all too well. He understood it fully.

"Neither should Onii-sama have to bear responsibility for all the competitors in the Steeple Chase Cross Country."

It was like being struck by a warning stick during meditation. Tatsuya dimly began to realize what his sister wanted to say, and where she was right while he was wrong.

"Onii-sama. I'm about to say something extremely selfish. Something I'm ashamed to even think of."

There was not a trace of humility or pretentiousness in Miyuki's tone. Not a single trace of hesitation, either.

"All Onii-sama has to do is protect me. The only one Onii-sama has to be responsible for, is me."

Only her voice, even now, held a quaver close to tears.

"Whether they're from First High, or another school altogether, Onii-sama does not have to concern himself with anyone except me!"

Miyuki audibly clenched her teeth. Her downcast bangs hid her tear-stained eyes.

"It's fine to leave the Parasite Dolls alone until the actual day. If you don't consider the fact the actual Parasites would only be released, those creatures aren't even close to worthy of being Onii-sama's adversaries. It's fine to just destroy them all on the day. After the competition has ended, I will destroy the spirits themselves."

Slowly, bit by bit, Miyuki raised her gaze to meet Tatsuya's. Her eyes were now dry.

"If you will insist on going even then, while impertinent, I will have to stop you by force."

Now Tatsuya felt dismay in earnest.

He could feel forbidden powers now gathering inside her.

"Stop this, Miyuki! Are you intending to seal my 'eyes'!? If you do something like that, you'll end up being unable to use magic as well!"

"I'd have to drop out of the competition tomorrow. In fact I guess I'd have to drop out of First High. But I'd prefer that to seeing Onii-sama force himself on like this!"

For the first time, Miyuki laid herself bare. With a tearful cry, she revealed her true feelings.

"Onii-sama, do you not even realise how much you pile on yourself!? From the morning to the evening you've been busy adjusting the competitor's CADs, then after the matches you consult with the other technical staff and

give advice, then teach the juniors late into the night while making preparations for the next day. Taking on the military and the Kudou on top of that.....Even for you, Onii-sama, it's far too much! You'll end up breaking!"

Tears spilled down from Miyuki's eyes.

Tatsuya finally realised just how tired he was, and just how exhausted his sister had become worrying for him.

The hesitation which had been clouding him cleared, and he found his heart was now lighter for it.

"There's no need for that."

Miyuki looked up dumbfounded at Tatsuya as if she had been struck. The frustration had disappeared from his voice, and in its place a kind gentleness had reappeared.

"I'll return to our room."

"Onii-sama.....?"

"Miyuki. You are correct. I was wrong."

Miyuki hadn't thought she would be able to convince him. As a human being, she had known all along that her brother was in the right. So she wasn't able to believe that she would be able to change his mind.

"It's as you say. You're the only one I have to protect. As long as I can keep you safe, the rest is superfluous. You are all I need."

Those were the words Miyuki had always wanted to hear, which now filled and bound her heart. As if her earlier eloquence had been a lie, she simply stood looking at Tatsuya in silence. Her gaze, as straightforward as it had been a while before, seemed to be staring into a dream.

"Let's go back."

Gently pushing on her shoulders, he began walking the puppet-like Miyuki back to the hotel.

--Behind them, Minami, who had kept to the background during the one man show, followed, keeping her head down to hide her twitching expression.

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The morning of the fourth day of competition. In the girls' Ice Pillars Break solo, Miyuki won both matches of the finals in under one minute.

Her victories were so decisive there was some worry that she might have traumatized her opponents; however, Miyuki did not seem worried over that. And the spectators could not even pay heed to the losers. So charming was Miyuki's smile that even though they saw that she had forgotten to offer a handshake to her opponents, they became even more entranced with her.

After the noon break was the Ice Pillars Break men's solo and the Shield Down men's solo. Tatsuya was in charge of Shield Down. On his way to the side of the ring, Tatsuya met up with Sawaki.

"Shiba-kun, you seem to be much better today."

He had been taking care of Pillars Break (in short, Miyuki) throughout the morning, but he had washed his face after breakfast.

"I'm that different?"

Simultaneously feeling that the comment was both belated and sudden, Tatsuya questioned Sawaki.

"Ah. The first day, the second day, the third day, I could somehow see that you weren't concentrating. I didn't intend to say anything because you were still doing your work properly. I thought you were gripped with worry about something."

Tatsuya was privately astonished. He had not been gripped by worry but by hesitation; however, he had not intended to let it show in his face. Even now, his friends--Honoka, Shizuku, Mikihiko and the rest as well as Isori and Azusa who were closer to him than Sawaki--each and every one of them had not seemed aware that his condition was off. Perhaps it was because Sawaki wasn't with him all the time so he was aware of a small change. Nevertheless, Sawaki's observation skills were terrifying.

"You look refreshed today. So I felt like mentioning it."

"Although I wasn't aware of it myself, fatigue might have been piling up on me. Yesterday, I had the first good night's sleep in a while that was enough to revive my constitution."

As an excuse, it wasn't a clever one, but it wasn't an unnatural one. Thinking that he wouldn't have accepted it himself, Tatsuya made that answer to Sawaki.

"That's great. Keep yourself fired up, Shiba-kun."

However, Sawaki didn't show any doubts. He was simply team spirited. He didn't consider anything else and remained focused on the upcoming match.

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The pace of Tatsuya's recovery and First High putting pressure on the leader was the same.

Day 4. First High's results: Ice Pillars Break-- Male Solo-3rd place, Female Solo-1st place. Shield Down--Male Solo 1st place, Female Solo-1st place. Third High started the day with a 100 point lead that shrunk to 60 points.

First High's advance continued even in the Newcomers tournament. On the 1st day of the newcomers tournament, both male and female placed 1st in Row and Gunner. Tatsuya was the engineer in charge of the boys along with Kent. He guided his kouhai pair to a victorious smashing of Seventh High. The female winner, Kasumi, displayed a 'there's nothing to it' victorious expression from the middle of the winners' podium.

The second day of the newcomers tournament was the finals for Ice Pillars Break and Shield Down. The boys finished off in 3rd place in Shield Down, but the girls won magnificently. Tatsuya was the engineer in charge of Minami, but he really didn't have a lot to do that day.

The boys got another 3rd in Ice Pillars Break and the girls were again victorious. Izumi had completely dominated Ice Pillars Break. When Izumi returned to First High's tent, her whole face---somehow seemed to smile at Miyuki, drowning her with unwholesome desire, but for once Miyuki was willing to be kind enough to be embraced as a body pillow (she just stood) until Izumi was satisfied.

And on the Third day of the Newcomers tournament.

"........This was inevitable."

"It was to be expected. Ayako is unrivaled at Mirage Bat……. Even I would be no match for her."

The finals for the main tournaments' Mirage Bat were two days away; today, Tatsuya, who was off tomorrow, was watching the finals of the newcomers' Mirage Bat from the stands. Only one of First High's athletes fought her way into the finals.

Actually, at the athlete selection stage, it had been suggested that either Izumi or Kasumi take part in the flower of the girls' competition, Mirage Bat. The idea had a lot of supporters; however, Tatsuya had strongly opposed it, and Kasumi ended up in Row and Gunner and Izumi was assigned to Ice Pillars Break.

Tatsuya's stated premises for opposing either of the pair taking part in Mirage Bat, which were 'Kasumi has an inclination for Row and Gunner' and 'Izumi has an aptitude for Ice Pillars Break', were not lies. The distinctive trait of the Saegusa clan's magicians was 'a lack of weak areas', which could also be stated as having an aptitude for every kind of magic. Mayumi was rather unusual for having a clear specialty.

However, his true reason was 'Neither could win against Ayako'.

Ayako's specialized magic was 'Ultimate Scattering', a convergence type magic that diffused vapour, energy, etc. evenly to the point where they could barely be recognized anymore, The Ultimate Scatter spell had no direct relationship with Mirage Bat. However, Ayako had another magic which was just as much a specialty of hers as 'Ultimate Scattering'.

That was 'Mock Teleportation'. The magic consisted of cloaking herself or perhaps a partner in a cocoon of air, quelling inertia, and moving instantly through a vacuum tube made of air.

The vacuum tube would be viewed as an obstacle to other athletes in Mirage Bat, so she couldn't use it like that. However, if the sequences of Mock Teleportation were downgraded, then the magic allowed her to jump faster than the eye could follow by continually creating gusts of air.

Even the use of flying magic could not compete with her speed. Mock Teleportation was extremely inferior to Flying magic in terms of potential movement distance. However, that did not pose a problem in Mirage Bat.

The only possible way to win against Ayako in this event would be to cause the ball of light to disappear before she could find it.

As Tatsuya and Miyuki expected, the newcomers tournament's Mirage Bat developed into a display of Ayako piling up her score alone. Their First High kouhai was putting up a good fight. She would probably manage to take second place.

However, that was as far as she could go. Because even now, the point spread was widening.

The winner of the newcomers tournament's Mirage Bat was Fourth High's Kuroba Ayako. The final results were 2nd place-First High, 3rd place-Third High, and 4th place-Fifth High.

Final day of the newcomers tournament, Monolith Code. Here again it was a difficult struggle but First High put up a good fight.

This year, Monolith Code was a round robin league; both the main and newcomers tournament used the six arenas over two days. Each team would have eight matches over ten rounds (in short, each team would sit out and rest two times).

Second day, ninth round. Lead by Shippou Takuma, First High's team had won all of the six matches they had been in so far. They had narrowly defeated the team that they had regarded as their greatest rival before the competition started, Third High, in the match before their last match, so a victorious mood ran through the rookie team. However, they had seen Third High lose to Fourth High before their eyes in the last match. This riveted Takuma and the others' attention like their heads had been soaked in cold water.

"That guy is incredible. What the heck is his name?"

Leo asked Tatsuya, who was in the stands, not the support staff area.

"Kuroba. Kuroba Fumiya."

"Kuroba, of course…."

Mikihiko, who was observing from the stands as well, mumbled as if hesitant to speak out.

First High was facing Fourth High in the final match. Unfortunately, it looked like First High was in a pinch.

Dotted with big rocks, 'the rock stage' of Monolith Code imitated a karst-like area. The one defending First High's monolith, which was erected on a bridge, was Shippou Takuma. Unexpectedly, he had volunteered to take on defense; until now, all the enemies had been repulsed. In their victory over Third High also, Takuma had annihilated the offense, which could be said to be one of the main reasons they won.

Despite that, Takuma was being pressed by Fumiya. Like Minamoto no Yoshitsune, Fumiya jumped from boulder to boulder, not allowing Takuma to lock him in his sights. And Fumiya was taking aim at Takuma with his gun-shaped CAD in midair, assaulting Takuma with an intangible attack.

The outer-system magic, 'Phantom Blow'.

Tatsuya had used it in last year's newcomers tournament, but compared to Tatsuya's, this was much more powerful. It was not just that; Fumiya was using more than phantom blow. Under the cover of the flashier magic, another magic was being slipped in, 'Direct Pain', Fumiya's specialty; a magic he alone could use to imprint pain directly into his opponent's mind.

He had stepped it down so that any magicians in the stands wouldn't notice, but even so, one blow was enough to take out Takuma's mind. As a result, people were unaware of Direct Pain and only saw a powerful Phantom Blow.

Naturally, being mistaken about the source of such power did not change the effect. The accumulated effect of the pain in his mind was clearly keeping Takuma from concentrating.

A decreased ability to concentrate decreased the force of one's magic. A decline in concentration decreased the force of the magic; there was a direct correlation between concentration and the success rate of magic. Takuma was trying to attack with 'Stone Shower'---a magic that used herd control to spray an opponent with a concentration of pebbles---in order to stop Fumiya's movements.

Stones whirled in Takuma's vicinity.

However, they did not attack Fumiya; they sprinkled down directly in front of the boulder Fumiya was standing on. Direct Pain was being emitted from Fumiya's hand concealed by Phantom Blow.

With all three members of First High's team being KO'd by Fumiya, Fourth High's victory was assured.

The curtain closed on the newcomers tournament ended with Fourth High's victory in Monolith Code. However, First High secured second place and was graced with overall first place in the newcomers tournament.

As a result, with the conclusion of the newcomers tournament, the difference between Third High, which was in 1st place, and First High, in 2nd place, was 5 points. The actions of the first years had turned it back to a battle between Third High and First High for victory.

The ninth day of the NSC. The fight moved from the newcomers tournament back to the main tournament. And under the starry sky, the finals for Mirage Bat, also known as Fairy Dance, were being held.

First High was sending two people, Honoka and Subaru, to the final. Honoka's engineer was Tatsuya; Subaru's engineer was Azusa. While both were second years, this was a calculated move to overcome Third High in one blow. With Third High only having one athlete advance to the final, the strategy had already half succeeded. In preparation of attaining the other half of the strategy's goal, Tatsuya and Azusa had gone all out. The rest was up to the athletes.

Wearing a uniform that was fitted to her entire body that had a light lime base tone, Honoka was a little embarrassed to be standing in front of Tatsuya. Even though she knew it was an athletic uniform, it was a decidedly embarrassing to be exposed in this manner to a male in close quarters.

"Absolutely nothing wrong. Do you feel there is anything wrong with your own condition?"

It was inevitable that after checking on the CAD tuning, Tatsuya would slowly and thoroughly examine Honoka's body. One's 'eyes' being more reliable than a machine at observation was something that was limited to him.

"No...nothing. I'm fine."

Honoka was so embarrassed she answered in a small voice. She had a greater reason to be embarrassed than simply being seen by a member of the opposite sex. Tatsuya understood that as well but had to pretend nothing was wrong because he understood.

Should I leave her alone for a while before the event so she can concentrate on the match…….Tatsuya considered and just as he was about to bring it up to Honoka.

"Excuse me, Shiba-kun."

Subaru had entered from the next booth where Azusa was doing her final check.

"Do you need something?"

His words were unfriendly, but his tone of voice was not all that hostile. Tatsuya was only asking; after all, even though they were members of the same team, Mirage Bat was an individual match. To visit an athlete this close to the match, although it could not be called thoughtless, was not normal.

"I thought I would give my regards to Shiba-kun."

"Regards? To me?"

"That's right, to you."

Subaru agreed with an insolent air. Naturally, this was her usual manner. Last year, well it doesn't matter now.

"I will be victorious in this match. Sorry Tatsuya, but the myth of your invincibility ends today."

However, this arrogant speech wasn't like Subaru.

The 'myth of his invincibility' referred to the fact that last year, athletes in his charge had only lost to each other, and so far this had continued to be true this year. Even at this year's NSC, Row and Gunner-pair-Eimi; [Ice Pillars Break]-pair-Shizuku and solo-Miyuki; Shield Down-pair-Kirihara and solo-Sawaki; newcomers tournament's Row and Gunner- male division and newcomers tournaments' Shield Down- female division had all secured victory.

"I am not the one who won."

However, Tatsuya did not misconstrue that as his own achievement. Eimi, Shizuku, Miyuki, Kirihara, Sawaki, and Minami. They were all athletes that would have won without his help. Tatsuya considered that he himself had been the lucky one. His response was accompanied by an exchange of ironic smiles; he wasn't letting it go to his head.

"Although, that is true. Athletes in Shiba-kun's charge don't lose. I will smash this myth."

However, this record put pressure on their opponents, so viewed objectively, there was no problem. This brazen attitude so unlike the usual Subaru was probably to get rid of that pressure.

To be honest, her attitude was unpleasant. However, that being said, to Tatsuya, Subaru was another athlete of his team. It would be unwise to make a clumsy response and increase the volume of pressure on her.

"Is that so?"

Other than that short reply, Tatsuya made no response.

After watching Subaru leave, when Tatsuya returned his attention to Honoka, she was all fired up for some reason.

"Tatsuya-san!"

Her eyes no longer showed any shame. Instead, they burned with competitive spirit.

"I am going to go all out. I'm going for it and winning! I will defend Tatsuya-san's no loss record!"

Worry that she might be so fired up that she self-destructed arose. However, in Honoka's case, trying to sooth her might have the opposite effect. Tatsuya had learned her personality well during their year's acquaintance.

"I see. I'll depend on you."

Rather, it was better in times like this to fire her up even more.

"Yes!"

Honoka happily agreed, her fighting spirit coming out in a bright smile.

Finals of Mirage Bat.

The results were Honoka-winner and Subaru-2nd place. The Third High athlete managed to get 3rd place, but Third High had only acquired 20 points compared to First High's 80.

In the overall rankings, First High was finally standing at the top.

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"Up to this point, I thought we might not make it, but somehow we managed to get to this point this year as well."

The students of First High seated for dinner radiated relief rather than joy. It was the 10th day of the NSC, and First High had widened its lead on Third High to 95 points with their win in Monolith Code.

Momentarily, it had been a huge 100 point lead, but it was still a complete turnaround.

"Yoshida was today's MVP. He really did well for us."

The one praising Mikihiko was his Monolith Code teammate who had the name of Minakami Carey; he was a third year who, due to being of Indian and British descent, possessed unusual coloring: blonde hair with black skin.

"No…..it wasn't just my efforts. I simply followed the lead of my senpais."

As he was speaking, Mikihiko eyed Tatsuya, who was a little bit away from him and surrounded by girls.

"I was also helped by Tatsuya….."

"That's right. Shiba has made great efforts as an engineer for us again this year. Hey, Shiba!"

Carey made multiple beckoning gestures to Tatsuya who had looked up in their direction. Tatsuya stood up holding the tray he was eating from. As he watched Tatsuya leave the flowery group of girls that included his sister, Miyuki, to come to this table full of males, Mikihiko might have had the malicious thought, 'He's the only one making good memories…..' but no one could be sure.

"Well, sit."

Those words were from the head of the men's table, Sawaki. Tatsuya did not dare to disobey---well, since he had brought his tray, he probably never intended to disobey---and indicated his understanding by sitting down.

"Good work, today."

"No, I wasn't able to do enough work yesterday, so, since I was able to recover a little."

Tatsuya had not hastily decided to take charge of Mikihiko. From the start, Tatsuya was supposed to be looking after Mikihiko's CAD. Although it was from the start, there had been the possibility that the Mirage Bat and Monolith Code events would overlap. If it had come to that, Tatsuya would have had to choose between being the engineer in charge of Honoka or Mikihiko.

"Nothing could be done about yesterday. We're well aware of that."

Everyone here understood that, but Hattori was the one who dared to speak up, demonstrating his 'honest but hardheaded' personality.

"It's as he said. Besides, there were almost no problems with the work you showed us from you taking it a little easy yesterday. Make no mistake, you contributed to today's victory."

"With this, we should get the combined total victory. So you can show your face to your senpais."

After Sawaki, Carey spoke up with a relieved look. This, his third year, was the first time he had been chosen as a representative, so the traditions were probably putting a lot of unnecessary pressure on him.

From Tatsuya's point of view, this was a very hasty pronouncement. There was still the possibility of a huge reversal in the point spread with tomorrow's Steeplechase Cross-country.

However, Tatsuya didn't point that out. It would be correct to say it was because he didn't care about the rankings, number of points or the overall victory.

He wanted to make tomorrow's event end safely.

No, he would crush anything that interfered with tomorrow's event publicly finishing safely.

That was what he was thinking as he made an inoffensive reply.

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After dinner, Tatsuya went to the hotel's observation lounge. The moon hadn't yet risen but the sky was clear. The outline of Mount Fuji was carelessly displayed by the starlight. From this viewpoint, the darkness resembled that of hell. From the balcony, he looked down on the course for tomorrow's Steeplechase event, which was a man-made forest with violent traps concealed within.

"How is it going?"

He questioned the doll in the shape of a girl right next to him.

[No response. I surmise that they are kept in a sleep-like state.]

The one that answered was the entity housed within the doll. A London conference had assigned it the name of parasite; Tatsuya and his friends called the pushion information entity, Pixie.

"As expected, there is nothing to be done but wait for tomorrow, hmm."

Despair oozed from Tatsuya's monologue. But no sign of depression was etched on his face. Tatsuya genuinely wished to know the whereabouts of the main actor in tomorrow's planned experiment, the gynoids with parasites implanted in them, the Parasite Dolls, make no mistake. However, when he had Pixie accompany him here, he had not actually expected her to be able to find them. In the first place, if all he intended Pixie to do was find the Parasite Dolls, then it would not have been necessary to climb to a high place. After all, since Pixie and the Parasite Dolls were essentially the same type of existence, if both were active then they both would be aware of each other.

Since the night Miyuki had persuaded him to let her bet her own existence as a magician, Tatsuya had thrown away the notion of stopping the Kudou clan's experiment that might add to the danger to the magic high school students himself. As the mysterious informer might have expected, he would decide what to do on the actual day then and there; in short, tomorrow. ---That the mysterious informer had not expected him to stop the

experiment before it started was clear from the lack of a delivery of supplemental information.

Tatsuya's coming to look at the site of tomorrow's drama, which was submerged in darkness, was nothing more than a whim. The daring might say he came up here to divert himself a little from the anger he felt over being pushed this way and that by the Kudou clan and the mysterious informer.

"Watch tomorrow!" for that reason. It was simple to take advantage of Pixie's ability to detect the Parasite Dolls.

"Tatsuya-kun."

The observation lounge did not have a do not enter sign. However, so close to midnight, he had not expected anyone other than himself to be weird enough to come the topmost balcony, which had neither lighting nor effective air conditioning.

"Master, have you come to cool off?"

Naturally, in terms of being wierd, Yakumo was at a much higher level than he was. …..thought Tatsuya. When he had been thinking 'as weird as himself', he hadn't been thinking of Yakumo.

"I, well, something like that. The night wind does feel better than air conditioning. But, doesn't that young lady over there need you for something? I think it's about time you speak with her."

As Yakumo spoke, he didn't go as far as shrugging his shoulders, but somehow he conveyed the impression that he had to Tatsuya on the balcony.

He could see a shadow within the darkness. The woman was older than him, but she was still regarded by the world as young. She was giving off a different aura than she usually did; her beautiful face wasn't wearing its usual amusement, probably due to the stern "at the end of her rope" look she was wearing instead.

"As I thought, the message was from you, Lieutenant."

Without a preamble, just as if they had already been in the middle of a conversation, Tatsuya spoke to her, making Fujibayashi's face lighten a bit.

"How did you know?"

"It was a matter of probability. If I consider who among my acquaintances has that kind of high level technical skill, your name heads the list."

"What if it was someone you didn't know?"

"It's futile to consider that possibility."

"Oh…."

Even though she relaxed slightly, Fujibayashi's face was still stiff. Was it from tension or was it from guilt, or was it due to a completely different reason…...Tatsuya was not yet equipped with the discernment to determine.

First, he had to ask about the things he didn't know; there was no other way to a resolution. Therefore, Tatsuya asked without reserve or hesitation.

"Did you give me that warning on the road to the former Lab 9? What were you trying to get me to do?"

"What….. I wonder what it was that I wanted you to do, Tatsuya-kun……"

Tatsuya held her eyes with a piercing gaze. But he found nothing he could use to determine that she was trying to fool him.

"Tatsuya-kun, shouldn't we change venues?"

Without magic to prevent eavesdropping or watching, they couldn't speak about it safely; the information was surely on that level.

"You're right…."

In this matter, it was not completely clear whether either Fujibayashi or the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion were allies. There was no sign of it being a trap, but he did not think the matter was as serious as that.

"You won't mind if Master sits in?"

"Okay."

"Eh, I don't care."

"Understood, I'll leave it to you."

After securing the two's agreement, Tatsuya gave his approval to Fujibayashi's plan.

The place that Fujibayashi took Tatsuya and Yakumo was inside an RV that was similar to the one Tatsuya was using as a work van. The parking lot was different from the one allotted for use by the Nine Schools Competition. It was a little apart from the other unoccupied parked cars in the lot.

[Master, I can't sense any wireless transmission waves.]

With the help of Ushiyama and the rest, Pixie's sensors had been stretched to the limits they could go without impairing her 3H body.

"Tatsuya-kun, here. Sensei, please take a seat as well."

After the pair took the offered seat on the simple sofa, Fujibayashi gave Pixie a slightly pensive look, but nevertheless, she went to the RV's kitchen without saying anything.

She probably hadn't intended to waste any time from the beginning. She came back carrying a tray with three glasses full of black liquid. She placed the glasses on the table and ignored the standing Pixie as she sat down opposite the two males.

"First, is it fine if I explain things in sequential order?"

Without proffering the drinks, Fujibayashi abruptly spoke to Tatsuya. The informal manner of speaking was presenting the stance that 'Tatsuya was a friend she was speaking to'.

"You're right. Before we get into discussing things, there are some things I would like confirmed."

Seemingly without any wariness, Tatsuya sipped from the glass. His throat was a little dry.

"Okay."

Fujibayashi was unsurprised at the way Tatsuya drank the ice coffee she had set out without any qualms. She was aware that Tatsuya probably knew more about the ingredients in the drink than she did; anyway, poison wouldn't affect him more than an instant.

"First is the matter of why you didn't leak any supplemental information to me as a follow up to your initial message. Were you under surveillance, Lieutenant?"

Right off the bat, he asked what she didn't want him to ask, thought Fujibayashi. However, there wasn't any reason not to answer now.

"Yes."

"Then, secondly. Is this contact at the urging of Major Kazama and Saeki-kakka. Or at the urging of Kudou-kakka."

".....It is my commanding officer's order. I am not under the surveillance of my grandfather."

By no surveillance, it might mean that this forced experiment of the Kudou clan had nothing to do with Fujibayashi Kyouko, or it might mean that they could trust her so much that there was no need for surveillance.

"May I ask a question, Ojousan of the Fujibayashi."

Before Tatsuya could ask that, Yakumo butted in from his side. Addressing her as 'Ojousan of the Fujibayashi' didn't seem proper, at least to Tatsuya. However, Fujibayashi didn't seem to mind; she smiled serenely as she nodded to Yakumo.

"Yes, go ahead."

"What might be the stance of the Fujibayashi clan?"

However, she wasn't able to maintain her poker face at the content of the question. She wasn't scowling because she hadn't wanted to be asked that question, but because she herself was anxious about the stance of the Fujibayashi clan.

"Neutral."

"They are truly against it but they can't oppose what the Kudou clan is doing covertly, is that what you mean?"

"....."

"The honored wife of the actual head of the Fujibayashi clan is the daughter of the actual head of the Kudou clan. That connection with the magicians who bear the '9' whom the traditionalists hold hostility to places them at the side of the magicians of the '9' although they are Ancient

Magicians. If they break away from the Kudou clan, the Fujibayashi clan could be standing alone in Japanese magic society…….is that it?"

Fujibayashi's face lost all expression, probably to keep them from reading what was going on in her head. However, it goes without saying that the disappearance of her smile made this attempt a total failure.

"But that is not what I wish you to tell me. What does the Fujibayashi clan feel about the usage of the occultists from the continent?"

Yakumo's eyes did not reflect his usual amusement. Instead, they bore a sharp gleam.

"If they did such a thing, I believe the Fujibayashi clan wouldn't like it. Regarding the refugees Makoto-ojiue welcomed into the former Lab 9, Father has repeatedly urged him to change his mind."

The gleam in Yakumo's eyes faltered as Fujibayashi gave a clear reply to the query. Certainly, the Fujibayashi clan and the Kudou clan had become allies with the marriage. Nevertheless, both those who had chosen to take the path of bridging the gap between "those who bore the number 9" and 'the Traditionalists' and the traditionalists who clung to the antagonism felt welcoming that another nation's occultists, who were searching for cracks in their defenses, was dangerous.

"Certainly, the refugee occultists possessed useful spells. By using the spells they provided, the volume of psion consumption by the Parasite Dolls slightly. However, despite that, both Father and I think it is a mistake."

"Pardon me, Master, but we should go over the sequence of events."

With Tatsuya's interruption, the tension that had arisen between Yakumo and Fujibayashi was quelled. Yakumo's face returned to its default faint emotionless smile.

"Lieutenant Fujibayashi."

On the other hand, faced with Tatsuya's treacherous fake smile, Fujibayashi started to feel an entirely different kind of tension.

"This incident has been incredibly frustrating and irritating for me. Although I am aware of what you would call the outline of the plan to test a new weapon on magic high school students at the Nine Schools Competition, I

don't have a very good grasp on what is actually happening behind the scenes. Well, the truth is I don't really understand. For some reason, my informant has been stingy with information."

"Uuumm…… Tatsuya-kun, about that."

Fujibayashi's face stiffened slightly but distinctly.

Perhaps seeing that satisfied him, and Tatsuya's sadistic smile disappeared.

"If you just ignore the intentions of those maneuvering behind the scenes, it's not all that complex."

Miyuki had already made Tatsuya aware of that, but since it was irrelevant, he didn't mention it.

"First, the anti-Asian Alliance hardliners in our nation's military changed the events in the Nine Schools Competition to more combat oriented ones."

No one disagreed with Tatsuya's point.

"Next, the Kudou clan took advantage of this to plan a performance test of the Parasite Dolls."

"Grandfather proposed it, but Uncle seems to have opposed it at first."

"So then, the one who decided to use the refugee occultists was Kudou-kakka?"

".....No, that was Uncle."

"Is that so. Let's call the person manipulating things behind the scenes through the refugee occultists who the current head of the Kudou clan took in X for now. X is aiming for the Parasite Dolls to go out of control and cause injuries and deaths among the athletes of the Nine Schools Competition. They might not intend to go as far as killing anyone, but they may intend to cause injuries that end their lives as magicians. X's ultimate goal might be decreasing our nation's military power by cutting off the supply of magicians who will become soldiers. Because an increase in the military power of Japan would be a hindrance to him."

"Yes, that is our take as well. Hence my reason for being here."

".....What do you mean?"

Fujibayashi did not avert her eyes from Tatsuya's gaze, which was laced with distrust and suspicion.

"Tatsuya-kun. We request your cooperation in stopping the Parasite Dolls from going out of control."

She did not rise up to bow, as she sat on the sofa with both knees together with her hands on top of them, but Fujibayashi bowed her head down low. She did not call him 'Special Officer" but "Tatsuya-kun".

"Cooperation?"

"Yes, this is not an order. This request is not something in the realm of what we can command you to do as your duty. Therefore, this is a plea for your cooperation."

Fujibayashi raised her head and got up from the sofa. Reading her unspoken intentions, Tatsuya got up as well. Fujibayashi moved in front of a box that looked like a coffin that could snugly hold a fully grown man. In front of Tatsuya who was by her side, she opened the lid.

Perhaps there was a spring in the hinge, as after the lid was opened only slightly, it sprang open. Inside was an ultramarine mobile suit---it resembled a bulky work jumpsuit.

"While the Parasite Dolls' performance test is unofficial, it is still a project entrusted to the Kudou clan of the Ten master clans by our nation's military. If we interfere in that, it could lead to discord within the military or a private war with the Ten Master Clans."

"You want me to become an illegal agent of destruction."

Tatsuya's voice was cold and hard. It was inevitable after all; it was implied that they wouldn't protect him if his identity was revealed. It could be called a mild response considering what had just been said.

"Even if you put it that way, I believe that nothing else can be done."

Tatsuya's gaze became even sharper; however, Fujibayashi met his gaze firmly. It might have been a bluff, but she did not appear to flinch.

".....Fine."

Their short face off ended with Tatsuya giving in. He had intended to finish off the Parasite Dolls himself from the start. He was actually grateful that

he was able to use the new type of mobile suit augmented with stealth functions.

"Thank you. You can use this car as you wish. Here is the key." Tatsuya accepted the wireless control box from Fujibayashi.

"When you are done with it, please press this button. After five minutes, the contents will self-destruct."

Fujibayashi indicated a corner of the wall. There was a red button surrounded by yellow and black caution stripes.

"What do I do with the mobile suit? I don't think it will be destroyed with the van's contents."

"If you place it in the box, it can be completely destroyed. Finish off the experiment."

"Roger."

Tatsuya directed a nod toward Fujibayashi while he looked at the 'self destruct button' with subdued eyes, and murmured that as if speaking to himself.

"Since this is in part a personal request, I will surely have you repay this favor someday."

As Tatsuya's statement made her cheeks lose color, Fujibayashi said farewell and left like she was fleeing. Since she offloaded the mobile suit and the RV onto Tatsuya, she was probably going to the hotel. Yakumo insisted on escorting her, 'just in case', as was proper. As their shadows merged with the big square one, Yakumo engaged Fujibayashi in conversation.

"Ojou-san, was that actually Kazuma-kun's order?"

".....What do you mean by that? Besides, could you please stop calling me 'Ojou-san'?"

Fujibayashi answered with a stiff face without looking in Yakumo's direction.

"Forgive my rudeness. Fujibayashi-san, I've been thinking. I would say that there was no need to make Tatsuya-kun do that. Make no mistake, by that I mean the Parasite Dolls won't actually go out of control, will they?"

"Are you saying I lied?"

"Since lying is part of your job….."

Yakumo barked that out in a tone that was both condemning and comforting.

"The weapon has a failsafe device. I don't believe Kudou Retsu is the type of man who would neglect that……. By the way, did you know, Fujibayashi-san? Even Mikkyou has spells for manipulating a doll like a puppet. Novitiate monks whose virtue is insufficient to summon genuine Gohou Doushi use them to create fake Gohou Doushi."

"No…..I didn't know, but I theorized it."

Fujibayashi responded to the sudden switch of topic by speaking with deliberation. Even though she peeped with sidelong glances to see what kind of face Yakumo was making, she completely failed to read his expression. Fujibayashi understood that the reason for that was not completely due to hostility.

"Before I came here, I went to the 'Main Temple', which I haven't done in a while. I questioned an expert in this area. He claimed that he had already achieved the ability to call Gohou Doushi and was no longer using fakes, but-"

It seemed like some kind of trouble had occurred at that meeting. Yakumo made a reminiscing smile.

"No matter what type of practitioner, they would not neglect to define the rules of offense and defense. And, when a puppet broke those defined rules, a punishment would be incurred. A sealing so that the puppet could not inflict more harm. The seal spell is said to be part of the enslavement spell."

Yakumo turned. His eyes were empty, his mouth had burst into a crescent shape. The face was so like a possessed doll that Fujibayashi let out a scream. ---No, she wasn't able to scream.

In an instant, Fujibayashi had succumbed to Yakumo's spell.

"The Parasite Dolls have the same type of spell installed, right? For instance, a prohibition about attacking non-combatants. If they didn't, they couldn't be deployed as an autonomous weapon."

"....It is as you say."

Fujibayashi had lost neither her mind nor her will.

"Even if the occultists want the Parasite Dolls to attack high school students, the foundation spell wouldn't allow it. The instant they became violent, the control sequence would switch to a sealing sequence and seal the parasite."

"That is what I heard."

However, she didn't hide it. She didn't lie.

"If the Parasite Dolls are let loose, is the spell keeping them emplaced inside the mechanical doll cancelled, and does the procedure to emplace the free parasite into the mechanical doll have to be repeated. Does this not affect the fact that the parasite is attached to the mechanical doll?"

"I don't know."

"I see…..the testing hasn't proceeded that far."

Yakumo took his eyes off Fujibayashi.

Exhausted, Fujibayashi dropped down to her knees.

Yakumo called out to the darkness.

"It seems like that is how it is, Kazama-kun. Did you know?"

The shadows created the silhouette of a person. As it proceeded from the parking lot, under the scattered lights of the hotel the form of Kazama appeared.

"Why are you here?"

"You say that there wasn't a need for Tatsuya-kun to cross that dangerous bridge."

"No, I don't know that."

Perhaps he didn't think his monitoring had been directly observed; Kazama paid no attention to Fujibayashi who was looking up at his own face with terror and answered his teacher's question with a ---visibly---pensive look.

"You didn't hear it from this Ojou-san?"

"Yes."

Kazama was also one of the users of ancient magic. He should also have general knowledge of puppet spells. There should be no way that he wasn't aware of the embedded failsafe. For him not to have asked about that….

"Hmmmm….. Apparently, there is a reason you want Tatsuya-kun to run amok."

"You didn't tell Tatsuya-kun either, Master, right?"

By answering the question with a question, he indirectly agreed with Yakumo's words.

"I have no reason to defend the decision, but the commander of the brigade is unaware of this. Although the Major General is well informed in how to use magic, this is only regarding modern magic; she is the same as any amateur regarding ancient magic."

"I thought you were her advisor……"

"Why didn't you stop us, Master?"

Apparently, this policy of not answering was inconvenient for Kazama.

"Because it would be unpleasant to stop him."

That didn't particularly matter to Yakumo. He hadn't intended to condemn Kazama from the start.

"Fujibayashi-san, about our earlier conversation."

If he thought there was no danger, he would have told Tatsuya that.

"That is the truth in general. There is a possibility that it will not work so well in this matter."

Yakumo, who had decided to divorce himself from the world, was seeing this incident to the end because he feared the impact this incident would have on the world.

"......For what reason?"

"Kudou Retsu is probably locked in the same mindset. Not just him, all the old guys at the former Lab 9 are assured by this bit of common sense."

He himself was just about the age to be called an old guy, but Yakumo referred to the retired generation of '9' as old guys.

"You should have received a detailed report from Tatsuya-kun regarding the nature of Parasites."

Kazama and Fujibayashi nodded in answer to the question without a word.

"Parasites came to our world from a different direction via a small hole in the dimension wall and they are overwhelmed by strong pure thought. They fuse with the owner of that strong pure thought and that strong pure thought serves as an impetus."

Yakumo repeated the phrase 'strong pure thought' many times. Fujibayashi was quicker to catch his meaning.

"Good grief…. What is Kokonoe-sensei trying to say!?"

"Strong pure thought. It would be strange if the grounds were not soaked in the desire to win the NSC on the final day of competition, right?"

"If the binding spell on the parasite malfunctions……?"

Kazama groaned out the question.

"Maybe they go out of control. Maybe they don't go out of control. I believe that we should at least decide that we cannot let them go out of control."

Yakumo's reply was terribly irresponsible and sincere.

"And when the out of control Parasite Doll is ultimately destroyed, the released parasite might possess a youth emitting a pure thought."

Neither Kazama nor Fujibayashi could deny the possibility of the worst case scenario Yakumo outlined. If Kudou Retsu himself were here, he probably would have turned pale and been unable to refute it.

"Therefore, I think it is correct to let Tatsuya-kun have that battlesuit. Tatsuya can deal a unilateral defeat to the parasite dolls. The military might also give up the foolish plan of using demons as you are thinking, Kazama-kun. So I will keep this matter under wraps for you. I want you to repay me by telling me something."

In repayment for not informing Saeki that Kazama was concealing information from her, Yakumo wanted information.

"About what?"

"Who sent those mainland occultists to the Kudou clan?"

Even though he was asked, Kazama didn't know. Fujibayashi was the one who answered Yakumo's question.

"......A Chinese merchant of Yokohama, a young man named Zhou Gongjin."

"Zhou Gongjin of Yokohama. I have been hearing that name a lot lately."

"You know of him, Master?"

Yakumo did not answer Kazama's question.

"Well, I asked about what I wanted to know, so I'll go. As promised, I will keep quiet about your concealment of information and covert actions."

Yakumo took a single step off the lighted path. That was all it took for him to disappear.

After Yakumo left, Fujibayashi finally got up.

"Major, well…."

"Go, Lieutenant. We do not want Tatsuya to see us."

After cutting off whatever Fujibayashi had started to say, Kazama walked to the hotel.

Perhaps, she thought, if they followed Yakumo, it would become obvious to Tatsuya; Fujibayashi obediently trailed after Kazama, who hadn't punished her.

"Lieutenant."

Without turning around to confirm she was there, Kazama spoke to Fujibayashi.

"Yes, Major."

"Were you deceived by Kudou-kakka as well, Lieutenant?"

"Wha?"

Although she continued walking, for a moment she seemed about to trip.

"About the possibility of the Parasite Dolls going out of control. However, you thought it was an impossibility, Lieutenant. Right?"

"Ah, yes."

She didn't immediately understand what Kazama wanted to say, so she had to make a guess.

"I did not confirm the information myself, sir. I was in a situation where I couldn't report immediately. I only brought in false information. Consequently, I prevented the giving of mistaken orders."

Kazama was offering to overlook Fujibayashi cleaving to Kudou's side.

"Good work, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, don't mention it."

Fujibayashi stopped and bowed deeply to Kazama's back as he continued on without stopping.

Chapter 7

August 15th, the eleventh day of the Nine Schools Competition. As with the ten days prior, Tatsuya rose from bed at the same time, had breakfast within First High's tent as usual, and commenced the final inspections on the contestants he was responsible for like always.

Today's schedule included the Women's Steeple Chase starting at 9:30am, with the Men's Steeple Chase scheduled for 2:00pm. The registration deadline was set for 5:00pm the previous day. Originally, the assumption was that schools that scored too low on the hierarchy would not attend, but the end result was such that most of the male and female contestants in their second year or beyond had all registered to attend.

Tatsuya was responsible for all the female students in Year 2 as well as Mikihiko for a total of 6 individuals. Working for six may sound strenuous, but setting aside the technicians from Year 1, it was originally intended for six people to cover the CADs for 24 people. It just so happened that everything was concentrated in the morning, as the average workload was not especially great.

He started working at 7:30am and was finished with maintenance by 9:00am. Furthermore, during this time, he was not continuously working since there was sufficient time for rest in between, though he may appear taxed in the eyes of any bystander. Hattori and Isori occasionally asked him "You OK?" Thus, no one suspected anything was amiss when Tatsuya wished to retire and rest without watching the women's competition upon completing his duties.

A competition like the Steeple Chase was wholly unobservable from the exterior. Each contestant must wear a signal transmitter to determine if they stepped out of bounds, and this also served to declare who was running around in circles. Still, even if miniature flying cameras were deployed, they wouldn't be able to capture anything from above due to the dense foliage, therefore leaving various cameras to capture approaching contestants as the only recourse.

Owing to this reason, many individuals planned from the very onset to observe the action from the widescreens set within the conference gala. Although such coldhearted individuals were the decisive minority among the contestants and auxiliaries, Tatsuya's situation enabled him to depart with only compassionate gazes seeing him off.

At 9:20am, the eyes of the representatives and audience members were gathered at the starting line. Each of the nine schools had dispatched a dozen people for a grand total of 108 young women gathered together and neatly lined up on the starting line. The women's outdoor gear was accompanied by a wide vest along with sturdy boots, gloves, and various protective gear such as a hat that served as a helmet, protective goggles, joint protectors, etc. While the equipment seemed extraneous, this was essentially work clothes that clung to the body. With so many people gathered in one place, there was a particularly dazzling effect.

Unbeknownst to anyone, Tatsuya slipped from the hotel and walked towards the parking lot. This was not the parking lot opened for use during the Nine Schools Competition, but the military one instead. No one would be the wiser if he was only approaching it.

Tatsuya rendezvoused with Pixie en route. She was dressed in a plain dress with loose long sleeves that was properly collared, comfortable around the waist that fell to ankle length, leaving no trace of the body uncovered. Fortunately, in this era, wearing such a getup even at the height of summer was nothing to raise an eyebrow over.

Tatsuya had called Pixie over because he would require her to locate the Parasites, but Pixie was accompanied by another young woman whom Tatsuya had not specifically summoned.

"Minami, why are you here?"

Upon being questioned, Minami bowed to Tatsuya before answering.

"This is an order from Miyuki-sama."

"Miyuki?"

Just now, Minami said "Miyuki-sama" instead of "Miyuki nee-sama". This was no slip of the tongue; this was clearly intentional. In other words, Minami was not currently acting in the capacity of his underclassman at First High nor as her alias as a cousin, but as a servant of the Yotsuba. Tatsuya correctly divined Minami's purpose.

"Miyuki-sama declared that she herself would not be able to provide any assistance to Tatsuya-sama during the competition and therefore wishes this one to assist you."

Minami's expression was steadier than normal. This was not the tender, albeit somewhat bemused, expression of a younger girl, but the face of a Magician able to stand on her own two feet. Setting aside whether this was her own choice or not, this was actually what Minami should appear like.

Tatsuya discarded any notion of dismissing her. She wished for her strength to be of use, and in truth there were areas she could be of assistance. The idea that "what can a 15-year old young girl do……" was far too arrogant, and, technically speaking, Tatsuya himself was nothing more than a 17-year old youth.

"Understood. Follow me."

"Acknowledged."

Minami never seemed to consider that she might be asked to leave.

Within the car Fujibayashi provided, Tatsuya changed into the Mobile Armor (Minami kept her back to him while he was changing) before inquiring with Pixie regarding the Parasites' location.

"There."

The instant Pixie's thought reached Tatsuya, 16 spots of light also flashed on the map in front of Tatsuya's eyes. Using the transmitter on board the engineering vehicle, Pixie had sent the intelligence directly to the screen contained within the visor of the Mobile Armor's helmet. Tatsuya had already made sure that Pixie and the engineering vehicle were synchronized the night before.

The number of the lights coincided with the amount Tatsuya had verified in Nara as well as the number that Pixie detected several days ago. This implied that Pixie had a complete grasp of the Parasites' location. Currently, "they" were arrayed in a formation within the stadium's center near the finish line. With Miyuki in the lead (Tatsuya judged that Miyuki would be leading the pack), the quickest scenario…… Or likely the worst scenario would have her encountering the first Parasite.

(--In that event, the first Parasite must be defeated within 8 minutes and the entire troop eradicated within 20 minutes.)

Tatsuya allotted this much buffer time before turning to Minami.

"Minami, remain here and prevent outside interference."

"Understood."

Minami obediently inclined her head when receiving Tatsuya's order. That being said, her eyes betrayed her own opinions on that order. Minami was likely assuming Tatsuya desired for her to stay beyond the line of fire. This was a dangerous misunderstanding.

"Minami, Pixie has the vital role of locking onto the Parasites' location."

"Yes."

She seemed to understand that point, which is why this time she answered in the affirmative with a slightly confused air.

"However, that does not mean this identification is one-sided."

Minami's eyes widened in comprehension.

"The Parasites can also detect Pixie. Just as Pixie knows that dolls have sensed her, those commanding the dolls will also realize that I am locking on to them through Pixie."

Tatsuya gazed deeply into Minami's eyes as if to carve his warning within the bottom of her heart.

"This vehicle may come under attack."

"Understood."

Minami nodded with a mildly anxious expression on her face.

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At 9:29am, Tatsuya released a real IFF signal for the Fuji Instructional Team and departed from the engineering vehicle at the same time, advancing towards the practice forest for the Steeple Chase under the guise of the Mobile Armor.

9:30am. At the starting line, podiums that stood two meters tall were installed every 100 meters. From these podiums, 41 shots rang out together to announce the start of the Steeple Chase.

The majority of the contestants proceeded cautiously, with the detachment from Eighth High entering the forestry first. This was likely because they

were Eighth High students who frequented outdoor training and proudly believed that "forests were their home territory".

As if unwilling to concede defeat, a Year 3 student from Third High sprinted forward. Though this was probably because she had yielded to the burning anxiety to beat First High, this spirited young woman sprang into the air – and promptly fell into a trap.

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Tatsuya switched off his IFF signal and pushed the Mobile Armor's stealth capabilities to the maximum threshold while he concealed himself near the outer edges of the practice forest. He charged into the Steeple Chase's arena the moment he heard the signal round go off.

The Parasite dolls were scattered across the latter half of the 4 kilometer long route. Seeing this formation, Tatsuya seemed to feel that they were trying to bait him in. This was practically saying "if you can take down all the dolls before the contestants arrive, then bring it". It appeared that he was dancing to someone else's tune.

(It would be arrogant in the extreme to think oneself to be omniscient, but at least this facilitates matters for me.)

Even if his speculation was correct, he was planning on accepting this gambit. Regardless of what this faceless manipulator was planning, Tatsuya's objectives would be fulfilled once he incapacitated the Parasite dolls and eliminated any threat they could possibly pose towards Miyuki.

Tatsuya kept himself close to the ground using Flying-Type Magic and proceeded towards the closest Parasite doll in the formation.

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Shortly after she began running, the audience stands placed before a giant video screen ahead of her erupted into laughter.

Generally speaking, there were three rules governing the Steeple Chase. First, obstructing other players was prohibited. Being caught hampering other players would result in immediate disqualification. Nonetheless, since vision was so limited for the reasons stated above, the chances of being

caught affecting other players was quite low, to the level that "being caught was purely luck". Thus, rather than calling this rule a punishment, it would be more appropriate to call this an unwritten agreement.

Second, there was no leaving the area proper for the 4 kilometer race. Each contestant wore a transmitter that was connected to the Fuji Practice Facility's independent GPS, allowing the competition committee to verify where each contestant was moving. In addition, each contestant would be aware of where they were currently located. The visor would offer assistance when prompted by the contestant to display the map and current position. Even if they were about to step out of bounds, an audible warning would also be emitted from the helmet.

Third, leaping to branch height was forbidden. Fundamentally, moving across the trees would no longer be Steeple Chase. This was the logic as "What is the fastest way to pass through a maze?" "Vaulting over the walls."

The GPS system was also three dimensional, so this could also calculate how high the contestants were jumping. Still, the only certain method to see if the jump exceeded the height of the branches would be through long distance observation devices, so here a simpler solution was used instead.

Strictly speaking, nets were set all over the place as obstacles. Accidentally leaping too high would result in being ensnared within the nets even before reaching the branches – as can be seen on the screen right now.

The one who ran afoul this was the contestant from Third High, the female student who took the bronze during Mirage Bat. The fact that these details were also broadcasted was surely a distressing outcome for the person in question, but was definitely highly entertaining. Just as a butterfly was caught within a spider's web, this strangely alluring scene was likely one of the reasons behind this as well.

This scene was not only played on this screen, but was broadcast over the network. The version displayed to the entire country was subject to approval from the JSDF, so only the network within the base could view this right now. On the other hand, so long as they were within the base, anyone would be able to see this even if they were at a distance. Across the forest, this scene was also being shown on the opposite side of the hotel within the conference room for high ranking officers in the command center.

"An unidentified Magician has breached the perimeter."

"Do you have a visual?"

"Negative. There are no cameras available."

"A recording will serve. Put it on at once."

"Yes, sir!"

However, the soldiers' attention was not drawn to the piteous state of the female student, but another person altogether.

The scene playing out over the network in real time was from an altogether different location in the practice forest.

Short clips were being shown of a group of green figures passing through the trees of the dark forestry.

"Can this be brightened further?"

"Yes, adjusting now."

The recording brightened as it was switched to an overhead cast. Within the picture that had grown brighter but allowed the outlines to blur, this man wore a uniform superficially similar to their own, but varied in a multitude of areas with their own Flying-Type combat uniforms.

"That is the new Mobile Armor developed by General Saeki's faction."

"Then, that intelligence turned out to be accurate?"

Robotic weaponry capable of using magic was a plan first proposed by the Kudou Family.

However, the magic weaponry being field tested during the current Nine Schools Competition was a plan formally sanctioned by the JSDF, but a covert operation in its entirety. Even hampering this experiment would not be subject to discipline by high command.

Opposing the Kudou Family – or rather Kudou Retsu himself, there was a high possibility that General Saeki would secretly dispatch saboteurs to thwart this experiment, so there were very few individuals within this unit who honestly harbored doubts regarding this intelligence. That being said, their shock at witnessing an incident where the Japanese military risked internal strife could be excused given their perspective.

These were no selfish men. Had their goal been mere prosperity, these men had far eclectic methods.

Clearly knowing that this would only do them a disservice – that is, hampering their advancement, they stuck to their guns in an act of pure patriotism. They believed that peace for Japan demanded a decisive victory over the Great Asian Alliance, and for this, they needed to convince the droves. They solemnly vowed that should persuasion fail, they would be forced into silence.

Nevertheless, this process ultimately needed to be realized through peaceful methods. The JSDF was there to protect Japanese interests, so inciting internal conflict was damaging national interests and hereby betraying their oaths. Thus, they had decided that regardless of the outcome, they would never resort to weaponry. They were hawkish towards the Great Asian Alliance and not towards their own countrymen. That was their stance.

From their perspective, that General Saeki was willing to commit magical assets to obstruct the opposing faction was utterly astounding. This experiment carried a certain degree of danger, so there were elements within their group who felt that they should avoid the women's competition at the very least and only conduct the experiment during the men's competition.

Yet, faced with their rivals' uncompromising stance at ruining this experiment, they could not help but feel that this was unacceptable even if no one was injured here – though the reverse was also true.

"Contact Kudou's engineer. Allow them to retaliate, but be careful not to kill the saboteur."

"Understood, I will order them to avoid dealing lethal injuries."

Colonel Sakai, leader of the hawks, was concerned for the safety of the Magician who was being used as a pawn. Although they stood in opposition to one another, he still gave the order to prevent the loss of a valuable asset to this country's future.

Kudou Makoto, head of the Kudou Family, frowned when he received the message coming from the experiment site.

"Forbidden from killing the saboteur……"

He had no objection to the order "do not kill the Magician". However, when the time came, these people would use "you are all Magicians" as a reason to push Magicians to the brink of extinction. Clearly, innovating Parasite dolls was to avoid this coming to pass, yet here was a Magician trying to obstruct this plan. Makoto could not suppress the boiling rage he felt towards this Magician.

"Switch the dolls' target to the invader and order them to act in concert to subdue the invader. Allow them to use any attack so long as they do not endanger human lives."

Makoto vented his irritation on the chief developer standing on the opposite side of the line, though in actuality he was ranting at the Magician who was seeking to hamper them.

"Makoto-sama appears to be in a rage."

The chief developer who had just been chewed out wore an impatient expression as he turned to his assistant.

"However, it's true that he is getting in the way."

The screen showed a Magician wearing a teal-colored Flying-Type combat uniform leisurely avoiding the trees as he sped directly towards the Parasite dolls. It appeared that this Magician possessed some sort of ability to accurately pinpoint the location of the Parasite dolls.

"Set the invader as the target and set the objective to capture. In addition, the dolls had detected something, correct? That must be this guy's assistant, so send someone to bring them in."

The chief developer ordered the Parasite dolls to capture Tatsuya while also giving orders to the private militia of the Kudou Family temporarily under his command to capture Pixie.

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Tatsuya stamped the group as he came rushing through the trees to stand before the Parasite doll and aimed his CAD at the body. Nevertheless, in the next second, Tatsuya was flung backwards by a powerful force before he could use any magic.

(This guy..... is very fast!)

Without crashing to the ground, he unexpectedly swam through the air for a moment. Using this brief moment that was rendered longer due to accelerated cognition, Tatsuya began analyzing the reason why his opponent got the jump on him.

During the exchange earlier, the Parasite doll's reaction was noticeably higher than Tatsuya's own. From detecting the other's silhouette to beginning to move, this speed was beyond human capability. This gave the impression that this was not only the superb information processing speed of an electronic brain, but a machine built specifically for combat.

At first glance, the slender body boasted little in way of power. Yet, in Tatsuya's recollection, this body garbed in female combat fatigues contained both might and agility that belied its outer appearance.

There was no helmet or cap because the short strands of hair were sensory devices for air and water currents. There were no goggles or protective visors because the eyes were designed to protect the light sensory devices within. The skin was composed of bulletproof composite material, the joints were rotors capable of swift motion, all coupled with a cooler beauty than even Pixie. This feminine robot was……

(Female combat servitors. So those were still being developed?)

Combat servitors were designed to be combat weaponry to replace infantry. Prototypes were already capable of using infantry weapons and researching was ongoing, although their primary utilization was for security missions in high risk areas. Tatsuya, however, had heard that development had ground to a halt. The reason being that rather than adhering to the human form, it was far more efficient to succumb to non-humanoid automatic gun turrets with more fluid mechanics.

Female combat servitors crafted for military use specialized in processing intelligence during combat. Nevertheless, this still should not result in Tatsuya being hit before activating his own magic.

There was no specific reaction point; the entire body was pushed away by pressure exerted evenly everywhere. This was the familiar feeling of being subjected to an attack through Acceleration-Type Magic. Also, this acute speed and coarse Eidos design –

(Single Systematic Acceleration-Type – No, this is telekinesis!)

Tatsuya adjusted his posture in mid-air to brace for impact.

His back collided solidly with a tree trunk. The shock was less than expected, though that was probably the armor cushioning the blow. This level of damage did not necessitate the use of "Restoration".

Tatsuya slid down the tree trunk to the floor and immediately adopted a fighting stance. Acceding to his own instincts, Tatsuya sprang off the floor. There was no chance to use magic, no time even for Flash Cast, so he could only use psions to enhance his muscles to explode away from his original position.

His assessment was rewarded by successfully avoiding the attack. A crater appeared at his earlier position as if a gigantic mallet had hammered home.

(This is also Gravity-Type Magic. This sort of primitive Magic Sequence is definitely telekinesis.)

The Parasite he fought against last winter also possessed similar inclinations. That entity did not use "magic", but relied on "ESP". Magicians abandoned "ESP" and received "magic" in exchange. Overwhelming speed was sacrificed for versatility, accuracy, and stability. Tatsuya felt that the opponent before him took this to the logical extreme.

(So, the Parasites rely on ESP as weapons!)

Maybe this was the entity's specialty, but optimism was something to be wary of.

Tatsuya operated the keys to his beloved Trident and set Gram Dispersal for Loop Casting. Decomposition Magic "Gram Dispersal" could destroy the structure of the Magic Sequence and reduce it to the original state of psion noise. The CAD activated and wrote the Eidos that differed from typical Magic Sequences into Tatsuya's specialized Magic Calculation Area.

The Parasite doll's body released psion light. Tatsuya's eyes did not perceive the light itself, but the structure and Magic Sequence formed by aforementioned light.

The Eidos fired at his legs contained the meaning "contort".

Before the "meaning" transformed into "phenomenon", Tatsuya's spell decomposed the Eidos itself.

The entity inhabiting the doll betrayed an aura of shock. Perhaps, this astonishment was not only felt by the doll but the operator as well, thus causing the doll's reaction to unexplainably falter. Forget following up; the enemy hadn't even activated the defensive field that was fired at Tatsuya during their first exchange.

At the same time that Tatsuya reached this conclusion, he was drawing closer to the servitor. Adjusting his body at the same speed that his thoughts were flowing, Tatsuya let fly his fist towards the doll's chest.

An oscillation wave composed of psions permeated the female servitor through the palm, temporarily canceling the psion barrier enveloping the Parasite's main body and revealing the spell that connected the Parasite and the doll.

(Replication complete.)

Tatsuya used the concept of Restoration Magic to replicate the spell.

Recovering, the Parasite doll struck back with superhuman force with its servitor arms, but Tatsuya had already finished his replication objective and jumped to one side, dodging the doll's attack.

Although it held the advantage since its physical body was that of a servitor, the human body held the advantage for manipulating its physical form thanks to endless practice.

He would use martial arts to surpass machinery, human determination to overcome demonic power.

Gathering strength into his left hand, he held it into a fist as he moved it to waist height. Tatsuya visualized a miniscule sphere being compressed within his hand.

He released the fist, as if pushing out the compressed sphere, without decreasing the distance and directly reached out his palm towards the Parasite doll from just beyond arm length.

Tatsuya sent an anti-Parasite psion pellet flying towards the electronic brain of the Parasite doll.

After stripping the psion defense barrier, the Parasite's pushion Eidos was left completely naked.

The spell connecting the Parasite and the female servitor had also been disrupted, so the Parasite was about to be set free.

If this was a human body, psions would not be concentrated only in the bosom area. Furthermore, the human body shuts down the moment all psions are lost and could no longer sustain the Parasite as a host. However, the female servitor was a machine whose performance would not be affected by psion loss and could continue acting as the Parasite's host if psions were replenished.

Tatsuya used Restoration Magic.

This magic replicated a previous Eidos and imprinted the replicated Eidos onto the current one.

This was not restricted to physical properties of the Eidos. So long as this Eidos was crafted with psions, this method could be used to replicate and imprint.

Tatsuya pumped a minute amount of psions into the female servitor and used the replicated loyalty spell to once again reconnect the Parasite and the female servitor. The recording of the Magic Sequence was a perfect replication, so theoretically it would remain loyal to the Kudou Family.

Nevertheless, the Parasite's compatibility values would not change, so there needed to be enough psions in order to move.

Tatsuya's assessment was right on the money.

After receiving the minimal amount of psions, instead of turning into a composite of psions and pushions and flying away, the Parasite went into hibernation within the female servitor.

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Of the Kudou Family's private militia that was dispatched to bring in Minami and Pixie on board the engineering vehicle, everyone was capable of using modern magic. The kinetic force at their disposal easily rivaled that of infantry rocket launchers.

The goal of the former 9th Research Facility was to develop modern magic that had incorporated elements from Ancient Magic. Yet, besides the three families inaugurated with the "9" in their name, none of the Magicians from the former 9th Research Facility were able to ingrain magic that took advantage of the specialties from Ancient Magic. This was exactly what exasperated the traditionalists, as all of their traditional elements were incorporated into new magic instead.

The Magicians who came from the former 9th Research Facility but failed to obtain the number "9" possessed power that was in no way inferior to their modern counterparts. By all rights, the magic at their disposal should be more than sufficient to subjugate a medium-sized vehicle and abduct the passengers within.

However, given the results, they never even touched the engineering vehicle Pixie was on.

From the very onset, one second after they consciously prepared to attack, the engineering vehicle seemed to recognize the harbingers of their magic through the active psions and was enveloped within a powerful magic barrier.

Reading the signs of magic invocation prior to the actual casting was a high level skill only wielded by well-trained Magicians. However, the strength and accuracy of the magic barrier that extended along the vehicle was even more astounding.

Simply touching the barrier would not result in pain, numbness, or injury.

They would only be pushed back with equal and opposite force.

Trying to alter the phenomena surrounding the car would also be rejected by the strength of the interference emanating from the barrier.

Attempts to heat, shake, or apply pressure to the vehicle along with the barrier were met with no success.

Even when they enhanced their bodies with Fortification and Acceleration-Type magic and charged, the vehicle remained stolid.

As a last gasp, they opened fire even knowing that this would bring security down on their heads, but to no avail.

As expected, there was no way to completely obscure the fact that gunshots were fired even with silencers. The security forces were closing in, so the private militia was forced into ignominious retreat.

Needless to say, the magic barrier that had repelled the Kudou private militia was erected by Minami.

The "Sakura Series" were genetically engineered to emphasize defensive barriers with reverse kinetic properties. As a member of the second generation, she inherited the outstanding capabilities of the first generation and was able to erect barriers with additional stability.

Minami had undergone combat training within the Yotsuba Family, so detecting the signs of an oncoming magical attack was a matter of course for her. That was because the Magicians who served the Yotsuba Family adopted "detecting the signs of an oncoming magical attack as a matter of course" as their standard.

In addition, the capabilities of Minami's magic barrier would not be found wanting against even descendants of the Ten Master Clans or maybe even eclipsed them. While she was unable to perform the Juumonji Family's high class barrier magic such as "Phalanx", as a single layer of defense, her magic barrier was the equal of Katsuto's own barrier.

Her defensive barrier was proof against impact from tank shells or the heat from missiles, so mere bullets from handguns or automatic rifles stood no chance.

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Tatsuya prudently used his "eyes" to examine the servitor that had fallen to the ground and verified that it had entered hibernation.

He had stumbled upon this method last night. After overhearing Yakumo, Kazama and Fujibayashi's conversation, he came up with the idea of taking full advantage of Kudou's spellwork.

His information detection ability could also be used on sound. Words would also be recorded as Eidos within the idea dimension.

Maybe, Yakumo had sought this outcome from the very beginning, but even if it were otherwise – in other words, even if this was completely eavesdropping, Tatsuya did not give a fig. His personality was not "adorable" enough to feel guilty over something like this.

The spells to create these dolls would obviously contain the spells to restrain these dolls.

In short, the spells that created these dolls were one and the same with the spells restraining these dolls.

Through Pixie, Tatsuya found out where on the dolls the Parasites were hosted. Since they utilized the female form for both combat and household chores, emulating real human beings to be precise, their fundamental design should be roughly similar.

Four limbs, motors installed at the waist and neck, sensory devices plugged into the head, fuel batteries set within the torso, and the electronic brain sitting where the human heart would be. Given that the Parasite dwelt in the electronic brain, it stood to reason the spell linking the Parasite and the female servitor would also be there – at least that was the conjecture, with no chance to test this hypothesis before taking to the field. Still, Tatsuya seemed to have come out ahead on this gamble.

"Pixie, how far is the closest Parasite doll?"

"Two Parasite dolls are on approach vectors from your 4 o'clock and 7 o'clock positions. Master, please be careful."

The last part of that almost caused Tatsuya to chuckle. This was not out of shock, but rather out of warmth. Somehow, Pixie seemed to be growing

more lifelike…… Though perhaps it could be said that she was becoming more and more like Honoka.

Parasites – independent Eidos from humans.

Perhaps they held the key to unlocking true understanding of the "spirit".

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Five minutes after taking off, the players were largely congregated together by school.

At four kilometers in width, the track was broad enough on sheer area alone, with thick trees separating areas into smaller zones. Even if all 108 people ran equidistant to one another, they would probably quickly lose sight of one another.

Furthermore, this was the first time this event had ever been held, so there was no telling what the initial zone would look like or where the traps might be. Contestants being disqualified along the way could only be chalked up as unavoidable circumstances, so players from each school set mutual checkpoints along the way. It was perfectly understandable that each school adopted this strategy.

Each of the schools were approximately tied at this point. Up until this point, each school was essentially groping their way forward. Despite this, they had still traversed a quarter of the track up until this point, their speed wholly thanks to the magic at their call.

Now that each school had more or less gotten a grasp of the course, acceleration was imminent.

"Kanon, you're charging too fast!"

Tomoko voiced her complaint at the accelerating Kanon, but Kanon never slowed down her footsteps.

"I've gotten a rough grasp for the feel of this course! My guess is that the other schools are about the same!"

Kanon shouted without bothering to turn her head. Her unstated rebuttal was "we don't have a chance if we don't pick up the pace".

"Everyone, it's OK! Don't push yourselves too hard!"

She added that phrase before continuing to speed up, repeatedly using Leaping Magic to avoid the tree roots, landing in areas with sparse grass and immediately following up with a tiny version of "Mine Genesis". The ground sank before her eyes, with precipitous amounts of dirt falling into the hole from the trees.

Holes and dirt showers. This was a trap that most likely intended to bury the unfortunate prey alive. Kanon smirked proudly before jumping over the hole.

Her right foot immediately sank into the soft mud upon landing.

"Oh, damn it!"

Kanon hurriedly tried to reactivate the recently terminated Leaping Magic a multitude of times. Her left leg kicked off in midair, allowing the right foot to spring free of the mud, but accompanied by a white rope around the ankle.

Kanon's body had completely left the ground.

The white rope was pulled straight upwards while the other end seemed to be tied within the soft mud.

Kanon's body was tied down by the rope and came to a stop in midair. Since the set parameters could not be met, the Jumping Magic fizzled, ultimately resulting in –

"Wah!"

--Kanon's body tilting forward and landing back into the mud.

"Chiyoda-senpai!"

The team from First High caught up to Kanon because she fell into a trap. With Subaru in the lead, the sound that emanated from witnessing this disastrous scene was one of astonishment rather than fear.

Kanon rose from the mud. That being said, everything from the chest down was still buried in the mud.

She yanked both hands from the mud and placed her right hand on the left wrist.

The mud erupted.

A mud spring many times more furious than the falling splatter erupted with Kanon's figure as the epicenter.

Detecting the signs of magic beforehand, Miyuki quickly erected a reverse kinetic magic barrier. Thanks to her timely crafted transparent barrier, eleven female students were spared being drenched in mud.

This explosion came from the personal Acceleration-Type Magic "Speed Ripper". Needless to say, the caster was the one at the epicenter, Kanon.

Standing in the middle of the crucible shape in the ground (of what was a muddy pond) was a perfectly immaculate Kanon with her head bowed. Forget the mud, not even a speck of dust was visible. She had likely set her body and clothes as the launching point for "Speed Ripper" and sent all of the mud and dust flying. Even the rope tied around her ankle was nowhere to be seen.

The tiniest of mishaps while using this sort of magic like this would result in accidentally tearing all the hair off of one's body and suffering unimaginable pain. Another possibility may be shredding every ounce of clothing, leaving an equally horrific outcome. However, Kanon seemed to have wielded this magic with an excellent grasp of skill.

Kanon used a freshly cleaned hand to push her protective goggles up and rubbed at her eyes. The goggles' sealing properties were up to par, so mud should not have gotten into her eyes. Yet….. Any young lass would like want to bawl her eyes out after being dunked into a mud pit.

Before the eyes of her seniors and juniors, Kanon carefully replaced her goggles at a normal pace before raising her head in direction of the finish line.

Anyone watching her back could tell she took a deep breath.

And then –

"—Is this a freaking joke!? What kind of military training is this?!"

Kanon shrieked hysterically and rocketed out of the crucible-like hole.

"……Let's be off."

"……Yes."

After Subaru finished speaking next to Miyuki, the two of them led their teammates racing down the course.

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"This is impossible! Is that guy even human?"

The chief of development for the Parasite dolls howled in anguish within the operational lab.

His proud creations were being retired one after another.

Two Parasite dolls struck from the flanks at speeds that not even Magicians from the Ten Master Clans could react to by firing oscillation waves. These two dolls possessed the demonic power of "sound" and could use subtle oscillation waves at will to disturb an enemy's sense of balance, or use violent oscillation waves to shatter their hearing. Correction, if wielded at full power without any thought given towards time requirements, being released at high efficiency would manifest Phonon Mazer even without a specified Magic Sequence. The demonic power at their disposal was just that powerful.

The attacks from his beloved dolls were taking effect. The dolls' attacks penetrated the shock absorbent layers on the newest combat armor devised by the military and wounded the Magician's innards. Just now, the lurch from the Magician was definitely not for show, but he was able to counterattack in the next second even after sustaining the attack.

The first strike was Ancient Magic, a sort of Nonsystematic Type Magic known as "Surge". The chief of development had no idea why this was all that was necessary to deal damage to the Parasite dolls, but for now he was able to hypothesize that this was some sort of attack. Nevertheless, the ensuing direct attack after drawing to close combat range –

"What the hell is this guy doing? What just happened?"

It was nothing more than a mere palm strike on the Parasite doll's chest. This mystified the chief of development as to why that was enough to send the Parasite doll into stasis. The Parasite was not released, nor was the servitor's body destroyed, but this was still sufficient to bring the machine to a halt.

If this technique was enough to send shivers down one's spine, then yonder body of flesh and blood that was able to continue fighting after sustaining multiple injuries from demonic powers from the Parasite dolls was even more horrifying.

"Could this guy truly be immortal…… An actual vampire?"

The conference room reserved for high-ranking officers within the general headquarters building was also suffused with the same befuddlement that ran rampant through the Operations Lab.

"This Magician…… What is his body made of? This is far beyond the level of being able to withstand blows."

The observation cameras were currently showing a four-on-one battle. Through the network, the Mobile Armor had noticeable indentions in the limbs and back. One of the dolls operated a metal ball and sent it flying in for a direct hit on the Magician's body while another doll sent mercury pellets shooting out from 18 different positions on the body that also penetrated the Mobile Armor.

Yet, in the next instant, this Magician struck back at the Parasite dolls as if nothing had occurred.

"Mahesvara……"

One of the members present murmured.

"What?"

Colonel Sakai posed the question.

"Colonel, during last year's disturbance at Yokohama and the defense of Okinawa four years ago, do you know of the combat Magician who was called "Mahesvara" by the enemy?"

"……Now that you mention it, I have heard of this person. Annihilating mobile weaponry in one blow, able to recover from any enemy attack without any lasting effect…… Could it be him?"

"Based on the situation, "Mahesvara" is a Magician who is connected with Major Kazama."

"Major Harunobu Kazama from the 101st Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion……"

Equipped with the Mobile Armor developed by the 101st Battalion and a Magician whose durability was such that men considered him immortal. The details were aligned.

"Why has such a monster appeared at a high school tournament……?"

The Nine Schools Competition was a highly important event for Magicians, but this was nothing more than academic entertainment for the JSDF. Even if the experiment went awry, at most there would only be four or five injuries among the students. Colonel Sakai did not believe that Saeki or Kazama were really concerned about the loss of life.

Unable to divine General Saeki's true purpose, Colonel Sakai felt a chill crawl up his spine in warning.

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The engineering vehicle that Minami and Pixie were on was currently in a tight spot.

The private militia from the Kudou Family (not that Minami was aware of their identities) had been scattered by the security forces that had appeared from the base. However, this time it was the security forces from base clamoring to get inside.

From security's perspective, this was a logical demand. This was because, given the events of the previous year, another unidentified organization had infiltrated the JSDF's base and even opened fire. Though the group they wanted to arrest and detain were the ones who had opened fire, their reaction to question why the other group was fired upon was also logical progression.

Despite this, Minami could not comply with their demands. Actually, it was alright if she did comply, but allowing unrelated military forces to witness the interior of the vehicle would complicate things for everyone.

"I've already said, we are the victims here. I don't see the reason that we must comply with your interrogation."

"This is a military facility, we have the right to police the premises! If you are innocent, then immediately disable the protective barrier and open the door!"

This banter was going back and forth for a while (speaking of which, the voice that was projected through the camera had been altered). Even if the current situation persisted, the protective barrier could last another hour. Furthermore, Tatsuya had given her a CAD that was fully operable through thought, so even if they suffered sudden magical attack, she was still able to alter the barrier on the fly.

Nonetheless, Minami personally wished that the situation did not escalate any further.

(Tatsuya-sama, please return quickly……)

Minami never considered to inquire ideas from the currently embattled Tatsuya – which was nothing short of hampering Tatsuya's battle, so she could only sit there and allow the situation to stagnate.

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Fifteen minutes after the race began, each school was no longer congregating together to challenge the course and had split into three groups racing for the finish line.

The leaders from First High's detachment were Kanon, Subaru, and Miyuki. Kanon had competed in Track and Field during 3000 meter hurdles, but as for her specialty in magic, she was someone who was more accustomed to the feeling of running while clearing obstacles. Subaru's specialty lay in "leaping". Miyuki deftly manipulated Flying-Type Magic close to the ground in order to avoid the obstacles.

The three of them were currently slightly more than two kilometers from the starting line and were about to progress into the second half of the course. Subaru, who had been lightly tapping off of the tree trunks while progressing forward, suddenly came to an abrupt halt and landed near a group of fruit trees.

"Subaru, what happened?"

Catching up to Subaru, Miyuki also stopped and began asking the other girl. Although this was a race, this was still a competition where the sort of hidden obstacles for this route remained unknown. Once they had discovered something, paying it no heed was foolish in the extreme. It was

precisely for this reason that they had split into twos and threes instead of advancing alone.

"Take a look at this."

Miyuki and Kanon looked towards where Subaru was pointing and both frowned. There, there lay what appeared to be a female body.

"—That's a female combat servitor."

Kanon said the object's real identity out loud. She was not someone who carried the look of technical expertise, but given that she was from the Chiyoda Family, a lineage that specialized in combat within the Hundred Families, it was highly probable that she had seen something similar before.

"Looks to me it has stopped moving. What do you two think?"

Miyuki immediately grasped that this was a Parasite doll that had been taken out by Tatsuya. However, she betrayed no hint of this to her cohorts and only described the scene that lay before her.

"Looks the same to me."

"Perhaps it wasn't recovered from an earlier training exercise?"

This sentiment came from Subaru. This speculation seemed to hold water despite being utterly impossible, but Kanon was none the wiser.

"……At any rate, there's no need to worry since it isn't moving. Maybe it's just to put us on our guard and slow us down."

This was Kanon's assessment. Given that she had already reached this conclusion, there was no need for Miyuki to voice any dissent.

"So?"

"Let's move on before we waste any more time."

Kanon took off at a run after saying this, with Subaru and Miyuki quickly following.

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(They're more capable than I imagined…… This is taking much longer than expected. Given the distance until Miyuki reaches this location, there's probably only 10 minutes of buffer time left.)

Surrounded by the Parasite dolls, Tatsuya ruminated to himself.

Compared to where he ran across his first Parasite doll, his current location was quite close to the finish line. He had already incapacitated every Parasite doll between here and the starting line. So long as all 16 Parasite dolls ceased to move, then this incident could be counted as finished "in his eyes".

Amid the incoming superpower (the Kudou Family referred to this as "demonic powers") attacks coming from all directions, Tatsuya charged forward while only protecting the vital areas of the head and heart and swiftly came into contact with the first Parasite doll.

The high speed movement from the servitor sliced Tatsuya's arm practically to the bone, but his other hand directly retaliated against the doll.

Instantly, the process that shut down the Parasite began to take effect.

Supported by the purely cognitive CAD, Tatsuya called forth the supporting Activation Sequence for Gram Dispersal from the Trident still sitting in its holster and dispelled the magic being directed towards his head. Next, he jumped over the fallen Parasite doll before him and temporarily escaped the enclosure before using "Restoration" to recover his arm to its original state. His Restoration was a magic that caused the enemy to scream "cheater", but this did not mean it was omnipotent or invincible.

Restoration was accompanied by pain.

This was an important element that could affect concentration and prevent magic invocation. He had already grown accustomed to pain, but even he was not able to avoid the temporary hesitation brought on by pain.

Utilizing a full backup of Restoration could block the pain, but under those circumstances, Restoration would temporarily monopolize the entire Magic Calculation Area, crucially delaying any counterattack.

It was precisely for this reason why Tatsuya shielded the vitals that impacted life and death. So long as his psions were not exhausted, he wouldn't die even if suffered a fatal injury. However, if he did suffer a life

threatening blow, then his survival instincts would automatically initiate a full backup and put every other magic ability on hold. If the opponent was a first rate Magician and Tatsuya had no support, the circumstances would only grow more and more dire. The combat prowess of the Parasite dolls was in no way inferior to first class Magicians, and the activation speed of their superpowers was superior to modern magic as well.

Nevertheless – the fact that he was still able to spell out these depressing words while still conscious indicated that he still had strength to give.

Once Tatsuya grasped the method to incapacitate his enemies without releasing the Parasite within, the Parasite dolls ceased to become a threat.

The reason why Parasites that had latched onto humans were so difficult to deal with was because the death of the host would immediately release the Parasite's main body, and Tatsuya had no method of directly harming the main body.

That being said, if the Parasite's host was a female combat servitor, then being damaged was a far cry from death. Furthermore, so long as there remained a minute amount of psions within the frame, the Parasite would enter hibernation as to avoid harming the main body.

Tatsuya was exposed before the crossfire of superpower attacks and suffered tremendously. Overcoming his own blood and pain, he forced the 12th Parasite doll into hibernation.

(The last four…… Are over there!)

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"Only four Parasite dolls left!"

The horrified reports shouted by his subordinates caused the chief of development for the Parasite doll experimental team to almost bite down on his lips hard enough to draw blood. He had no idea what Tatsuya – what "Mahesvara" was assessed as. Yet, what the chief of development did know was that if a single Magician was able to crush 16 Parasite dolls, this would undeniably leave a mark of failure upon the Parasite doll development project.

"However, the four remaining ones…… The initial four will not be such easy prey……!"

The chief of development muttered to himself as he gazed at the images being broadcasted to him by the Parasite dolls.

These words sounded both hollow and unwilling to back down, causing his subordinates seated to his sides to watch with deep unease.

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The instant after Tatsuya detected the four Parasite dolls, a cannonball the size of a man's fist shot towards him before he could use magic. Through his Eidos senses, Tatsuya "beheld" the cannonball that flew at a speed almost beyond the human eye to follow. Diameter at 12 centimeters, weight, five kilograms, speed clocked at 400 kilometers per hour. Although its speed was much lower than that of a bullet, the energy contained within was highly unusual.

Tatsuya reached out with his right hand to catch the cannonball. Crafted from dirt, the ball shattered the moment it came into contact with his hand. This was not simply crumbling, but exploding outwards in the form of tiny pebbles. This was done by deconstructing the dirt that made up the cannonball down to the level of pebbles, using the scattering motion to release the kinetic energy within.

Tatsuya used his specialty to deflect the enemy's opening attack, but there was no time to catch his breath. His opponents created a field as thin as silk and sought to shoot it towards him. Directly in front of him and to the flanks were two repulsion fields, an attack that shared a similar theoretical background with Weight-Type Magic "Pressure Slash". That these fields were precise enough to rend and tear without a blade or steel wire to serve as a base must be thanks to the precision of their mechanical frames.

Once more, Tatsuya was forced to pre-emptively go on the defense. Gram Dispersal nullified the Parasite dolls' Pressure Slash. At the same time, he entered close quarters combat range with another one of them.

His opponent held a large blade that measured 30 centimeters in each hand. The weapon itself posed no threat to Tatsuya, but the problem lay in the speed of the slashes.

(Swift–)

Purely in terms of speed, this easily rivaled Erika's personal acceleration magic.

(Nonetheless–)

She had "skill". While her movements were precise and without extraneous movement, that was all it was, and the exactitude of the movements could be easily predicted. Tatsuya avoided the left and right combo and activated Gram Dispersal. The acceleration magic empowering the machine immediately lost its effect, lowering the doll's movements to the level of "ordinary humans".

That's one down. Tatsuya thought as he was about to strike out with his right hand, but –

"What!?"

A repulsion barrier manifested in front of the blade-wielding Parasite doll. This did not come from the frames that had cast Pressure Slash, as it was the fourth Parasite doll who had cast the barrier.

Tatsuya was rocked backwards while the blade-wielding Parasite doll retreated as well. Gathered together, the four Parasite dolls formed a diamond formation. The foremost was built for high-speed close quarters combat, the right utilized compressed dirt as cannonballs, the one on the left hand side wielded Pressure Slash, with the fourth one bringing up the rear with repulsion barriers.

A cannonball sped towards where Tatsuya had recovered himself. Tatsuya used Flying-Type Magic to bolster his jump to one side to avoid the attack, but a razor sharp flying blade was sent his way. After Tatsuya deconstructed the magic blade and charged forward, he was met by two gigantic blades supported by a transparent barrier as a shield.

(These ones have a high degree of cooperation.)

This was practically as if all four of them were of one mind as their teamwork was markedly different than the 12 that had already been retired, leaving no opening for Tatsuya to attack.

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"Excellent, Prime Four, that's the way!"

Within the Kudou operation lab, the chief of the Parasite doll development project was highly energized by this outcome.

"Just like that! Cut him!"

Filled with trepidation, his subordinates prodded the animated chief with a question.

"Um…… Chief, weren't we ordered not to kill him?"

"Ah? Are you all blind? That Magician possesses powerful regeneration, cutting off a limb or two won't kill him."

The chief kept his eyes glued to the screen and responded in a tone that brooked no argument. The pupils fixated on the screen danced with madness.

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"Master, to your right!"

A telepathic voice rang out in his brain. Acceding to those instructions, Tatsuya swiftly tilted his body to the left, allowing the dirt cannonball to slip by his right shoulder and hurtle into the rear.

"Reloading will take 50 seconds. A flying blade is on approach from the left, please avoid by stepping one meter to the right."

Tatsuya followed these avoidance instructions and the flying blade formed by Pressure Slash indeed passed 30 centimeters to Tatsuya's left.

"Pixie, can you tell how the enemy will attack?"

Tatsuya used the armor concealed within his glove to deflect the mobile Parasite doll's blade and asked Pixie over the transmitter.

"Incoming cannonball aimed for the head…… Correct, Master, I can hear them speaking to one another."

"Speaking? Are you telling me that they are not acting on their personal judgment?"

Using concepts from fisticuffs, Tatsuya lowered his head to avoid the cannonball while defusing the enemy's personal acceleration spell at the

same time. The right hand holding the spell that disabled the enemy servitors was a hair away from making contact, but was blocked by the enemy barrier at the last second.

"Those four are constantly exchanging thoughts while acting."

As Tatsuya was being blown back by the repulsion barrier, Pixie's answer to his earlier question was passed to his ears. This answer gave him a deeper insight into the situation. This was not one brain controlling all four limbs, but more like one mind was controlling "the four of them" by splitting into four partitions.

Additionally, Pixie was able to intercept the Parasite dolls' "conversation". In that case, they were much easier to deal with.

"Pixie, transmit enemy chatter."

"Acknowledge."

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"How did it suddenly turn out like this?!"

The chief shouted in confusion, though this time his subordinates shared his sentiment.

The attacks coming from the first four Parasite dolls crafted by the former 9th Research Lab – the Prime Four, were no longer leaving their mark.

The dirt cannonball was being blocked by the enemy's hand just as he was avoiding the attacks from the Gravity Dagger (they also referred to the Pressure Blade's flying edge as the G-Dagger). The highly mobile Parasite doll's attacks were being dodged as if her blows had been telegraphed to the enemy, who also voluntarily retreated just as the repulsion barrier began to manifest. While their side had not reported any major damage, it was plain that their enemy was now clued in to the movements of the Prime Four.

For the first time, the Magician wearing the Mobile Armor seized the initiative on offense. The dolls altered their combat pattern by leading with two shots from the G-Dagger towards the legs, but they were immediately dispersed shortly after being fired.

The chief and his minions were wholly unaware of what happened, but even if they stopped to think, the Parasite dolls would not cease their activities. Once an autonomous weapon received its orders, they would continue their mission until receiving fresh commands or ordered to desist.

On the screen, the agile model was assaulting the enemy and the artillery model cupped its hands in preparation. The blade was a feint as the real blow would come from the shot. Yet, the Magician in the Mobile Armor seemed to know this from the very get go and passed to the side of the blade-wielding servitor.

The Eidos of the repulsion barrier began to form – and abruptly vanished with the information seas.

The Magician in the Mobile Armor appeared before the artillery model and laid his right hand on the cannonball. The cannonball turned into dust and slipped through the Parasite doll's fingers.

Like a human being, the artillery model stood stock still in amazement.

The left hand of the Magician in the Mobile Armor had already landed on her chest.

"How can this be possible……?"

The researchers screamed in disbelief – or were perhaps unwilling to believe, as the devices monitoring the artillery model within the Prime Four indicated that the servitor had shut down.

The four Parasite dolls possessed flawless coordination on the attack. This was precisely thanks to their superb compatibility, made all the weaker when one of them was removed from the equation.

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"Slashing, right hand, right leg, left leg."

Even without Pixie's guidance, Tatsuya had already recognized this attack pattern. The artillery model's responsibility was to restrain the enemy with long range attacks, so now Tatsuya could concentrate on dealing with the enemies' magic once that restraint was no longer in place.

After Tatsuya used Gram Dispersal to deconstruct Pressure Slash, he rushed the sword-wielding Parasite doll. He abolished the protective barrier in front of him and stretched his hand towards the blade. For the Parasite doll, this should be beyond their anticipation – this must not have been programmed into their electronic brains. There was no way of telling whether the delay arose from the machine or the demon within.

Tatsuya seized hold on the blade.

New Damascus alloy – a compound created from nanometer-long silicon tubes – abruptly crumbled into sand. Not only did this apply to the blade he caught hold of, but the other blade he had not touched also suffered the same fate.

Since magic was used to disintegrate the weapon, there was no need to lay hands on the weapon in the first place, but this did serve to be a more shocking scene to bear witness to.

As he was the instigator, Tatsuya naturally felt no astonishment at this turnout. Rather than approaching the disarmed servitor, he instead stepped towards the Parasite doll in charge of the defenses stationed to the rear. Without taking advantage of the Mobile Armor's abilities, Tatsuya needed only one step to close the five yard gap between them.

The repulsion field that served as the protective barrier spread out again. Without paying any heed to variety, the speed at which this superpower could deploy the protective barrier was much swifter than Tatsuya.

Yet, the magic at Tatsuya's fingertips was not restricted to only disrupting magic being invoked, but also abolishing magic that had already been completed, so an ability that could merely erect a barrier held little meaning against him. Without any accompaniment on offense, just this alone was not going to constitute a threat against Tatsuya.

The defensive servitor fell into hibernation.

The remaining servitors were the agile model used for close quarters combat and the frame built for close range fire support. Right now, they were nothing more than prey dancing in Tatsuya's palm.

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"Master, congratulations!"

Pixie suddenly released a loud cry over their telepathic connection, almost causing Minami to accidentally disable her magic barrier.

"Here too……"

This passionate outburst seemed wholly incompatible with an alien creature, and thus Minami only mumbled to herself. Not that she was aware of this, of course.

"Pixie, has Tatsuya-sama defeated all the Parasite dolls?"

Rather than being concerned for Tatsuya's wellbeing, her followup question seemed to be a verification that contained no hint of worry.

"Correct. Master has caused my kin to all enter hibernation."

It was only now that Pixie returned to vocal communication, but Minami paid that detail no heed.

"While I really wish he could come back quickly, but……"

At this point, Minami realized that even if Tatsuya suddenly returned now, that may only serve to pour oil on the fire.

The security troops were still deployed outside around their car.

Under these circumstances, if a masked soldier in full combat regalia with an unknown affiliation appeared, this may result in a fiery outcome –

Just then, Minami's portable terminal emitted a ping to alert her about an incoming call.

Who could this be? Minami thought as she glanced at the sender. Originally, she held low expectations as she surmised this must be an anonymous call, but the screen betrayed her expectations as the name "Kuroba Fumiya" appeared on the screen.

"Hello?"

How does he know my phone number? Minami thought in bemusement as she answered the phone.

The barrier continued to persist.

"This is Kuroba Fumiya. Are you Sakurai Minami-san?"

"I am."

"Thank goodness I got through to you. I sincerely apologize for looking up your phone number without your permission. Setting that aside, I would like to double check something."

"No, I don't mind at all if Kuroba-sama knows my phone number – what did you need to check?"

"Currently, is the car covered by the protective barrier and surrounded by security yours, Sakurai-san?"

"Please call me Minami….. Your assessment is correct."

A somewhat confusing air came across from the other side of the terminal, but the conversation continued unabated.

"……Minami-san, you're not acting as a decoy, are you? In short, is there a need to keep security here?"

"Not only do I not want them here, they were causing me tremendous hassle…… Furthermore, Fumiya-sama, please do not call me "Minami-san", a simple Minami will suffice."

"……We can discuss that part another day. Setting that aside, I will knock out all the security forces over there. Please sustain the protective barrier until then."

"Understood, we're counting on you…… Also, please call me Minami. After all, I'm only a maid and Fumiya-sama is one of the candidates to be the next head of house."

"…..Then I shall begin. This should take less than 5 minutes."

The tone of Fumiya's parting words was rather kind.

"We won……!" Once Minami heard these words, it was hard to tell whether those words reverberated through her.

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As he looked towards the familiar psion waves, he could see a particularly sturdy magic barrier. After noting the possibility and verifying, he discovered that it was indeed one of the "Sakura series" affiliated with the Yotsuba named Minami, who was currently staying with Tatsuya.

Fumiya could roughly estimate what had occurred. That vehicle likely belonged to his esteemed "Tatsuya onii-san" and served a purpose in the experiment to destroy the Parasite dolls. In that case, the security forces must be barred from access and they could not add on to Tatsuya's burden.

(All of you certainly are terribly unlucky.)

Fumiya pulled out a glove-shaped CAD. Currently, he had the appearance of a typical male student in high school, but chose not to appear before others. He persuaded himself that any "disguise" would be unnecessary.

Fumiya was currently 20 meters from the vehicle. In truth, "Direct Pain" could easily hit the targets at this range, but he had crawled to extreme close range to prevent overdoing his attack.

All of you are seriously unlucky – Fumiya internally said to the security guards before mercilessly applying Direct Pain to the security guards crowded around the vehicle.

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By the time Tatsuya returned to the engineering vehicle, he was struck speechless by the security guards lying haphazardly around the car. Fumiya had alerted his subordinates from the Kuroda Family to clean up the mess, but the men in black were only just arriving.

Making sure that there was no one else present, Tatsuya climbed on board and stowed the Mobile Armor within the "coffin" as he was instructed before pressing the self-destruct button. He then departed the scene with Minami and Pixie in tow.

Just as Fujibayashi said, not one of the security guards laying around the car were injured.

Not that Tatsuya was there to witness that.

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The fundamental difference between Steeple Chase and any normal Track and Field exercise was that there was no way to tell what happened to the

other contestants. A normal cross country race would also have limited mobility, but at least the route was clearly defined and a person's position could be determined by who was ahead or behind. However, there was no clear path in the Steeple Chase, vision remained obstructed by the foliage, and, aside from the few teammates that were close by, there was practically no way of ascertaining the status of other players.

In spite of this, the transparent protection visor could be relied on to report how many people had arrived at the finish line. At the corner of the map display, the number of people who had already arrived remained at zero.

There was only 200 meters until the finish line.

Miyuki was certain she was in the lead.

Running by the side, Kanon was of the same mind.

Kanon suddenly picked up speed and Subaru also began the final sprint so as to not fall behind.

Miyuki hesitated for a moment. Her current speed was not intentionally dialed down; this was simply the maximum speed if one was going to remain on guard for traps. Moving any faster raised the possibility of running afoul of one of the traps. Should she emphasize safety, or risk it all and strive for first place –

"Ah!"

"Wah~!"

Just as Miyuki was debating this, a series of shrieks came from ahead of her.

Multiple automatic turrets spat out a continuous stream of paint pellets, causing Kanon to crash to the earth after taking multiple hits. The paint pellets possessed no penetrating power, but on the other hand, the kinetic force of the pellets were transferred entirely into the impact. There was simply no way to remain upright while absorbing these shots from below the waist to the flank, so the only thing Kanon could do was go to ground in a defensive stance to avoid injury.

Meanwhile, Subaru was hit in midair by a web canister and was brought down ensnared within the net. As the magic Subaru used was not "Flying-Type" but "Leaping", part of the descending force was mitigated by magic, hereby allowing her to take less of a blow than Kanon.

Nonetheless, the sight of her flailing about in the net was probably much more shameful for the young girl than what Kanon was going through.

"I…… I don't think they need to deploy military training at a place like this……"

Kanon groaned in pain, but it was hard to say if her words were meant as a complaint or just grousing since her tone signified that she was more than up to the challenge. Miyuki judged that this should not constitute a problem for either of them and alerted the two of them to her decision.

"Excuse me, I'm going on ahead."

Neither of the two replied, though there was blatantly an aura of "you heartless person~!" emanating around them.

That being said, Steeple Chase was an individual competition. Even if they were schoolmates, they remained competitors during the race given that they only teamed up out of mutual benefit. Miyuki fully adopted her merciless stance (not really) and once more started running for the finish line.

Out of the corner of her eye, she carefully monitored the map.

The number of people who reached the finish line remained at zero.

And so, Miyuki became the first one to cross the finish line. Relying on sheer determination, Kanon managed to get back in the race and cleanly finished as second. Having spent much more effort getting free of the net, Subaru had to settle for eighth. As for the other notable members from First High, Honoka and Shizuku combined to capture fifth and sixth.

Chapter 8

Col. Sakai's group very hurriedly left behind the command tower. They reasoned that the possibility of them becoming targets of that flying magician [Makeishura][10] was nil. But they were very aware that they were in a position to support the Parasite Doll experiments. Reason enough that some major horror was heading for them.

As they left the building and managed to reach the parking lot, for some reason the sky turned dark.

On seeing the sky, Sakai realized that something was amiss.

The sky didn't turn cloudy.

They were smothered with a thick fog.

"Just what is this ... ?"

"Is it gas?"

"No, it's magic!"

The magician accompanying Col. Sakai managed to get right what was behind the thick fog.

However, they only knew that it was magic. Without knowing its effects, they could not make it disappear.

"You have been invited, Col. Sakai and staff."

As they shifted their focus onto the playful voice, they saw a man in his prime dressed in a suit in spite of mid-summer and wearing diagonally a soft hat bowing smartly before them.

"I invite you to the world of dreams."

After that, Sakai's consciousness slipped into the darkness.

◊ ◊ ◊

The steeplechase cross country concluded with Miyuki taking the girl's crown and Masaki taking the boy's crown.

And this year's overall went to First High. Though it was a tough fight all the way, the morale of Team First High was even higher than last year.

Although at the very end Masaki didn't manage to grab the overall title, Third High somehow showed up at the night after-party with satisfied expressions. It's possible that they may have felt Masaki's "next time for sure" reaction in his efforts.

For other schools it was Fourth High that stood out for winning the championship in Rookies' Monolith Code and Mirage Bat. The lovely twins responsible for them, their dignified manners so out-of-place for their appearances, gave credence to the rumors from before.

And it was not only the players. Even the adults were raising their celebratory cups all together ... .

◊ ◊ ◊

With a smile, Kudou Retsu gave a toast to the former heads of house Kuki and Kuzumi, and all the families from the [Ninth] still following them up to now.

No way it was a radiant smile. It was a smile with regrets floating about somewhere. Even the former heads of house Kuki and Kuzumi knew what regrets were brewing deep inside Kudou Retsu's heart. That was why they didn't raise it to Retsu; they often alternated toasting each other as if telling him to do the toasting instead.

"Everyone, I thank you for your efforts."

Finally, Retsu started to spin out his words of gratitude spontaneously.

"The parasite doll experiments may have ended with disappointing results on the surface, but they gave a hard fight against the [Makeishura]. This would leave a strong impression to the people planning to use magic in the military."

Approving applause came from the party.

"Those who plan to draft young magicians will have been overthrown by tomorrow, along with the traditionalists. That too is a considerable result, I might say."

"Not tomorrow."

However, the voice suddenly interrupting them was heard from the other side of the door.

"Who's there!"

The lower-ranked stood up and faced the door.

Retsu knew who the voice that said those words belonged to before he could ascertain the appearance.

"Kazama-kun ... and Elder Saeki."

However, it was not only Kazama who had rudely disrupted the proceedings.

"It's been a while, Elder Kudou."

Everyone present at the party were lost for words at the unexpected incident.

None of them even offered Saeki a seat ---- and to which she paid no heed.

"What brings you here, to be so sudden. This is a private gathering. A shame, but we cannot offer you the hospitality you deserve."

"I'm very much aware that this is an unexpected visit. If you accept our present then we will take our leave."

"A present?"

Saeki's way of speaking was clearly undiplomatic. But even if that was not the case, the factions of [Nine] had bad impressions of her as a sly female fox who went against Retsu.

Amidst the silently rising animosity, Saeki signaled to Kazama.

["I am Col. Sakai of JSDF GHQ. I am the one who conspired with the head of house Kudou, Kudou Makoto, and promoted that the experiments on autonomous magic weaponry be held at the Nine Schools Competitions ..."]

Everyone present, apart from Retsu, all stood up and howled.

The voice being played back from the recorder in Kazama's hand was an acknowledgement and a confession that they conspired with house Kudou to force through a weapons test with high school students as guinea pigs.

"...So Col. Sakai fell into your hands?"

"We are not the ones who captured Col. Sakai."

"...Would you mind telling me who did it?"

"I received this voice recording from house Yotsuba."

All those who stood up and were gathering about had gasped.

"Maya.... As I thought, the Yotsuba would never let away those who made a move on their kin."

Retsu nodded, his way of speaking strangely consenting.

"That would not be the case."

However, Saeki repudiated those words.

"And what do you mean by that?"

"When I received the voice recording, Yotsuba-dono added a condition that this recording should not be announced publicly."

Retsu inquisitively raised his own eyebrows, unable to comprehend Maya's true intentions.

"Yotsuba-dono's objectives were to purge Sakai's group, known as the anti-GAA hardliners. I received this voice recording from Yotsuba-dono on the conditions that I do the clean up after the purge and not to open its contents to the public."

"I see... Sakai-kun has earned the wrath of [that person]."

Retsu muttered in agreement. However he was still unable to understand all of it.

"Well then, what will you do with the data you have?"

"Elder Kudou, the JSDF will no longer treat magicians as weapons."

"... ... ..."

"If you so wish I will even stake my own head for this. Magicians will no longer be compelled to stand in battle against their wishes. That goes for your grandson, and for [him], too."

"You ... want to tell me that I retire?"

"It's true that the parasite dolls make for a beneficial weapon --- as long as there are no mistakes on how it was used. Had you done it ten years earlier, misguided uses like this time wouldn't be done."

"You're speaking out of turn, Major General!"

"Enough."

Retsu followed it with a gesture to calm down Kuki Mamoru, who had snapped out of his astonishment and was getting enraged.

"You performed magic weapon experiments on immature magicians. No matter how you gloss it over, I cannot say this was the right way to do it."

Kazama, from Saeki's side, butted in. His voice was filled with magma-like anger.

"Restrain yourself, Major Kazama."

"Sir, I apologize for my impudence!"

This time it was Saeki who rebuked Kazama.

She looked at Retsu squarely in the eye.

"Please leave the magicians' rights to us currently in active duty. We will not stand for any action that will put you, Elder Kudou, in fear."

Towards Saeki who had made that simple declaration,

"Very well."

As his shoulders dropped, Retsu answered back, somehow seemingly happy.

◊ ◊ ◊

August 16, 2096. Night.

Yokohama Chinatown was wrapped up in a silent tumult.

"Target is heading for the west gate."

"We have an advantage in location on the other side. Make sure you corner him with no less than three people."

The group rushing about in the dark and exchanging only faint whispers at each other was a hit squad spearheaded by Kuroba Mitsugu.

"Target spotted... Guaaah!"

"What's wrong!?"

"Some kind of a hound-like being has.....!"

"Everyone watch out! Zhou Gongjin uses magic different from even what the Dahan and GAA use."

The confidant standing beside Mitsugu raised an inquiry as if muttering.

"He's tougher than expected, Boss."

"He's a big game who had thoroughly messed up with domestic affairs. It's very unlikely that he's weak in personal capabilities."

Mitsugu answered in a composed voice. With even no hints of trembling.

The confidant continued on with a relieved tone.

"But the mistress obliged to deploy Shiba Tatsuya-dono...?"

"We will secure Zhou Gongjin before he arrives."

However, on hearing his confidant's words, Mitsugu abruptly laid bare his irritation, as if to make his composure unbelievable.

"Will it be okay not to wait for the arrival of Fumiya-sama and Shiba Tatsuya-dono?"

"What the hell is Maya-san thinking?"

Having totally lost his self-control, Mitsugu ended up calling Maya as [Maya-san] in spite of his confidant standing in front of him.

"That person shouldn't be used in this situation. That person shouldn't be even let outside in the first place. That person is the manifestation of the

Yotsuba's sins. Just locking him up within the Yotsuba is enough for our atonement."

Mitsugu, after noticing his confidant's dumbfounded look, coughed loudly.

"I'm going in. You take charge."

"Yes, Boss."

Mitsugu's figure dissolved into the darkness.

This will be brought to an end without even waiting for Tatsuya, the confidant thought.

"End of the line, Zhou Gongjin."

A few minutes later, Mitsugu was standing in front of Zhou.

"My goodness..... It's Yotsuba's darker side, the head of house Kuroba, showing himself for a lowly servant like me. Looks like you have overestimated me."

"Don't think we underestimated you. Blanche's uprisings, No Head Dragon's secret maneuvers, guiding the GAA special forces, arranging to smuggle in Parasites..... You sure have the nerve to do them by yourself."

"I assure you, I only gave a helping hand. They would have happened sooner or later without my assistance."

"You're a bother for sure. For making later into now."

"Can't you see that postponing wouldn't solve anything?"

"I can't see the reason why postponing is a bad thing."

Mitsugu slowly closed the distance.

"At this distance you can't get away with your specialty Ghost Walker[11]. Give it up, Zhou."

"Indeed. To get up close and personal means my divination is useless."

Zhou didn't lose his composure as he judged that his special spells were sealed up.

"Therefore, this will hurt a little bit. --- 疾, [哮天犬]!"[12]

Mitsugu didn't have the time to say "What the ---?"

For a four legged shadow descended from the night sky.

A silhouette of a giant hound rushed on Mitsugu and bit off one of his arms.

"Guh...."

Struck silent, Mitsugu crumpled down.

The black hound had already disappeared without a trace.

"Good grief..... That took me ten years to prepare it. Oh well, it would do in exchange for Kuroba Mitsugu's arm."

Muttering those words, Zhou Gongjin's figure slipped into the shadows.

"Father!"

After having gone to fetch Tatsuya, Fumiya, as soon as he saw Mitsugu's figure, pushed his way through the wall of men in black suits and ran up to him, his expression visibly changing.

"Just who did this..... Oh yeah! Tatsuya-niisan!"

Fumiya had remembered the unusual power of his esteemed second cousin he took along, and gave out a longing look. In response, Tatsuya used his left hand to draw out a pistol-shaped CAD.

"No... I don't need your help."

"Father, what are you saying!?"

"Fumiya."

Tatsuya told Fumiya, about to resort to violence by shaking hard at a heavily injured person, to control himself. Then he aimed his left hand towards Mitsugu.

"This may not please you, but leaving you as you are would only make Fumiya and Ayako unhappy."

He then activated Restoration. *Mitsugu's right arm*, bitten off and location unknown, had popped up from somewhere, joined with the injury and was connected.

As he unconsciously applied pressure onto *his own right arm*, Tatsuya muttered as if speaking to himself.

"Leaving behind Miyuki and Ayako and coming here was the right course of action. Be that as it may, Kuroba-san, for you to be that seriously injured... Just what kind of magic did Zhou Gongjin use?"

Mitsugu, looking annoyed at his own right arm, shook his head as he avoided looking Tatsuya in the eye.

"I don't know. Zhou Gongjin said something like [Howling Celestial Hound], but it's impossible that there's a spell with that name."

"That's fictitious then..... It must be a class of transforming bodies magic. He's a worrying opponent..."

Tatsuya didn't ask where Zhou ran off to.

All he knew was that from here on, they would have to locate this person at all costs.

(... to be continued in next volume)

Afterword

It's already the 13th volume of 「The Irregular at Magic High School」. Did you have fun reading this 「Steeplechase Chapter」?

Though it was already indirectly touched on in the story, 「Steeplechase」 in English refers to an obstacle course race. The initial concept was not to use this as a reference to the competition on the final day of the Nine Schools Competition, but as a reference to the obstacle course race in which the protagonist has to seek out the true nature of the conspiracies thrown at him while overcoming various obstacles. However, looking at the results, rather than an obstacle course, it feels more like a maze with many blind alleys. Perhaps, it might be more apt to name this chapter as 「Meandering Chapter」. But then, if the title were 「Meandering Chapter」, it would give the impression that even the participants of Steeplechase Cross-Country would be meandering about the course.

The story this time is not about the Nine Schools Competition, but surrounds the Parasi-Doll conspiracy, and since the focal point is the Steeplechase Cross-Country as the stage, most of the activity of the participants in the other competitions have been left out. While you can catch a glimpse of the various episodes unfolding not just during the matches but also in-between the matches, it was impossible to incorporate their sub-episodes.

And thus, I will be writing the sub-episodes occurring concurrently along with this 「Steeplechase chapter」 in the form of short stories. While it's not yet confirmed how many sub-episodes there will be and what form they will take, you should be able to find out more through the official twitter in the near future.

Speaking of near future, by the time this book has reached your hands, the anime should have started airing. Please enjoy that as well. As the blu-ray will be accompanied by anecdotes of the Magic High School characters that have never been presented before, please look forward to it.

With that, hope we'll meet again in the next volume, 「Ancient City Insurrection Chapter」. Hope you can also patronize both the comics and anime.

Please continue to support 「The Irregular at Magic High School」.

Satou Tsutomu

References

1. ↑ Grandfather
2. ↑ a specific variety of brandy
3. ↑ this refers the Yellow Turban Rebellion that was related to Taoist sects. Although I don't know of any golem warrior legends relating to it.
4. ↑ In Japanese myths, holy hermits study in mountains
5. ↑ He's referring to witchcraft from Normandy which is currently part of France
6. ↑ an isolation field type of spell
7. ↑ Buddhist terms referring to things that cause indirect and direct effects
8. ↑ A club member listed on the roster who takes part in few or none of the club activities
9. ↑ A magatama is a comma shaped bead. The Nino indicates it is jeweled and is probably a reference to the Yasakani no Magatama, a piece of the Japanese Regalia
10. ↑ In Japan, they use "Makeishura" instead of "Mahesvara". The people of the Great Asian Alliance used the term "Mahesvara" but the Japanese are referring to him as "Makeishura"
11. ↑ Reference here
12. ↑ Zhou deliberately spoke in Mandarin for the last part. A literal translation would be "Execute, [Heavenly Hound]". Closest reference for the hound is here.

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